

THE LIGHT COUNTRY TRILOGY

The Science Fiction Classics

TAMA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

TAMA, PRINCESS OF MERCURY

AERITA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

By

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TAMA, PRINCESS OF MERCURY

TO

Forrest J Ackerman

loyal and trusted friend for many years.

CHAPTER I. A NIGHT OF HORROR

THE NEWSCASTER'S VOICE came blaring from the sound-grid:

"And we have upon good authority the information that the Bolton Flying Cube is almost ready for another trial flight. Dr. Norton Grenfell, when interviewed yesterday, was evasive regarding his plans. But from other sources we learn that at the next Inferior Conjunction of Mercury and Earth—which occurs in about two weeks from now, at which time the two planets will again be at their closest points to each other—we are informed that this new concept in interplanetary travel—the Flying Cube, will endeavor to reach Mercury—"

"Well!" exclaimed Rowena. "They think they know a lot, don't they?"

"Hear him out," I said.

The voice went on: "There is undoubtedly no further menace from Mercury. The marauders from last fall will not come again. Jack Dean and his wife, Rowena Palisse, will, of course, be upon the Flying Cube when it makes its adventurous flight. Dean and his wife and Guy Palisse and the strange girl named Tama, and her brother Toh, who came last fall from Mercury, are still in seclusion. We have as yet been unable—"

"To locate us," Guy said with a grin. "This fellow has a lordly manner, hasn't he?"

I am the Jack Dean whom the newscaster mentioned. This was in March; in August of the previous year the world was startled by an attack of Mercurian invaders upon a girls' summer camp in Maine. Some of the girls were abducted—vanished in the night. I met Rowena Palisse then.

She's a very tall girl, with the regal aspect of a Nordic queen. I myself am several inches over six feet. I think our abnormal statures first attracted us to each other.

Rowena's brother, Guy, had tried to get to the moon ten years ago, an abortive attempt in a moon rocket. He left the earth, and was not heard from again. It was to Mercury the rocket carried him. He lived there those ten years—and last August he came back, a captive with the Mercurian invaders.

How the ship of these invaders was destroyed in outer space some three hundred thousand miles from the earth; how the giant Mercurian Groat was killed; and Guy, the Mercurian girl Tama, and her brother Toh were rescued by the Bolton Flying Cube—all this was public news.

And now Rowena and I were married and, with Guy and Tama and Toh, were trying to live in seclusion from the prying newscasters. The affair was over. Groat was dead. The only spaceship existing on Mercury had been destroyed. There was no further menace.

Ah, if we had but known !

The newscaster's voice interrupted my thoughts: "We feel sure that within a short time now the whereabouts of Jack Dean and the others will be disclosed. The Broadcasters' Press Association has every hope of being able shortly to supply its millions of subscribers with television scenes of the strange Mercurian girl Tama—"

"Not a chance," Guy gibed. "Get that right out of your mind, young fellow."

Rowena, Guy and I were sitting before our audiophone grid in a secluded new cabin set in a lonely spot in one of the northern states not far from the Canadian border. Forests surrounded us. A little lake was

nearby. It was a clear, frosty evening of mid-March. The lake was frozen now. Snow lay thick on the ground and edged the naked tree branches with white. The underbrush, ice-coated, gleamed with a white brilliance in the sunlight. The snow was piled high against our windows; but inside, with a roaring log fire, we were snug enough.

Toh came into the living room. He was a slim, straight and boyish fellow, this Mercurian youth of twenty-one. In height he was no more than a little over five feet. He was dressed in high laced leather boots, corduroy trousers, and a flannel shirt open at his slender throat. It seemed a costume utterly incongruous to him. His thick black hair was long to the base of his neck. A band like a ribbon of red was about his forehead to hold the hair from his eyes; and with his high-bridged nose, it gave him something of the aspect of a North American Indian youth. Toh was gentle-featured, almost girlish; yet there was about him an unmistakable dignity and strength.

He joined us quietly, unobtrusively, at the radio grid.

Guy said, "Toh, listen to this—he's talking about us."

"The air always talks, these days, of the Bolton Cube," Toh said, in a soft, gentle voice with an indefinable accent. He spoke perfect English. Guy, on Mercury, had had years to teach him and Tama.

"Right," said Guy. "And they're all excited because the news reporters can't find us."

For a time we listened to the droning voice. Guy replenished our log fire.

"They don't mention Jimmy," he commented.

Jimmy Turk was my best friend. He had been with us on that memorable test flight of the Flying Cube, when we had gone, last fall, out of the earth's atmosphere and met the Mercurian spaceship. He was an operative flyer in the newly established Interstate Patrol.

Then the newscaster did mention Jimmy: "It was thought that James Turk might be persuaded to reveal the hiding place of his too-modest friends. But it seems not. He visits them occasionally, and it is no secret that our reporters have tried many times to trail him to their lair. But he is fleet and clever as clever in avoiding our pursuit as he is in tracking down criminals."

Rowena laughed. "That newscaster is frank enough, anyway.

"Where is Tama?" Guy asked suddenly.

"Out flying," said Toh. "She left just a little while ago." Guy frowned. "She shouldn't be out. I've told her—not while there's still light."

"Pretty cold," I said.

"She has a knitted suit," said Rowena, and smiled. "I told her, too, that she shouldn't go, but she went. You know Tama. But she can't go far. She can hardly fly with those clothes weighing her down, and the Earth's gravity—"

Guy went to the window, stood gazing out. Presently he called us.

"Look here!"

The sunset light was almost gone, but one could still see a snow-white cloud sailing high overhead.

Guy pointed. "Look—"

We went outside. A tiny dot was far up there, dropping out of the cloud. We knew it was not Tama. It came down like a plummet, resolved itself presently into a midget monoplane descending almost with a nose dive.

"Jimmy's dragon," I said. "He must have been at fifty or sixty thousand feet—dropping through those clouds—making sure nobody is trailing him here."

Jimmy landed on the snow nearby. Climbing from his little pit, he was a shapeless bundle in his electrically warmed flying suit. In our living room he revealed himself—a short, stocky, redheaded little daredevil, with an unfailing grin.

"Hello, folks! A damned B.P.A. plane was after me when I left the city. Hope they had a good trip. I say, how about a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Rowena apologized. "Of course you'll want something. I'll tell Eliza."

Eliza was our one servant, a middle-aged woman. She and Rowena returned presently with a hot breakfast for Jimmy.

"What brought you, Jimmy?" I demanded.

"Oh, just to see you. Don't I have to see my buried friends every so often?" His grin faded. "I've got news, a message for you from Grenfell: We're definitely going—the Cube is starting for Mercury—the tentative date is March thirtieth ... I say, Rowena, you do serve the most marvelous coffee."

He took it as lightly as that! In two weeks we were leaving for Mercury. My heart pounded at the thought of it. We had been waiting here only for Grenfell's decision.

Jimmy went on: "Inferior Conjunction is the first week in April—the shortest distance. I've been down to see the Cube. They've got perfect equipment this time. Everything's about ready. Grenfell wants you in Trenton in about a week, say March twenty-second."

The Flying Cube had been built and now was housed in the midst of the huge buildings of the Bolton Metal Industries near Trenton, New Jersey.

"Where is Tama?" Jimmy asked.

Guy was still anxiously at the window. And now Tama was coming. We went to the cabin doorway to meet her. She came, flying low over the frozen lake. A great, white-bodied, red-winged bird! Flying sluggishly as though tired, but she was only hampered by the weight of her clothes, and Earth's heavy gravity.

The wonder of Tama had never ceased to thrill me. The men of Mercury were very much like the men of Earth. But the women with their great feathered wings—

Her warm knitted suit made her slim body white as the surface of the frozen snow-covered lake. But her long black hair was waving in the wind; and her crimson-feathered wings with their ten-foot spread showed plainly in the twilight.

Her body hung at an angle, breast down. She flew straight for our doorway, fluttered down, her feet dropping, her wings flapping backward as she righted herself to land on tiptoe among us. She was panting with the flying effort, and laughing, and the frosty evening had brought into her clear white cheeks a mantling red.

"Tama!" exclaimed Guy. "You shouldn't fly out before it's dark."

"No one saw me, Guy. I must get out. It smothers me indoors ... Oh, good evening, Jimmy!"

A few minutes later Tama had taken off the knitted suit, and wore now her native garments. Beside the tall, queenly Rowena, Tama was an elfin, fantastic figure indeed. As small as Toh. They were, in fact, twins, twenty-one years old.

Tama stood before me. "You are not angry at me, Jack?"

"Well—"

"Guy is."

Elfin little creature, pouting at me to placate my anger. But like her brother, there was about her a decided dignity. The set of her jaw could be firm; her dark eyes, twinkling at me now, could flash with command. On Mercury, as Guy had told us, she was leader of all the winged virgins of the Light Country.

On Mercury, a leader. But here on Earth, so strangely fantastic. Her crimson-feathered wings were folded now as she stood among us. They arched from her shoulder blades, with their flexible feathered tips just clearing the ground behind her. She wore silky fabric, gray-blue trousers bound at her ankles; sandals encased her bare feet. A silken gray-blue scarf was wound about her waist, crossing in front, covering her breast and shoulders, crossing again between the wings behind and descending to her waist.

"Angry, Jack?"

"Well—"

I found it difficult to be angry; yet she should not have gone out.

We sat down to discuss the voyage to Mercury in the Cube. Guy sat with his arm about Tama. It was no secret that they were in love. They were to be married as Tama wanted, on Mercury, in her native Hill City, at the end of this forthcoming trip.

"I am glad," said Tama. "It seemed so long, waiting here."

The elfin look was gone from her now. With her thoughts back on Mercury she was Tama of the Light Country, a leader. She met my gaze.

"It is not that I do not like your Earth, Jack. But you know I am worried about things in the Hill City. My girls, the winged virgins as you call them, Jimmy, tell me just what Dr. Grenfell says. We go, surely?"

"Sure thing!" said Jimmy.

Late into that night and most of the next morning we discussed it; then Jimmy had to leave.

"See you in a week," he told us. "Ill come up and fly you down to Trenton."

We stood beside his tiny dragon to see him take off. If we had only known under what terrifying stress of circumstances we next were to see him !

* * * *

The remainder of that memorable day passed without incident. Jimmy left just before noon. That evening we all retired early. Our log-cabin bungalow was a rambling, many roomed structure. Rowena and I had

a bedroom off the living room. Toh and Guy slept in another room; Tama occupied a room alone. And Eliza, the housekeeper, had a bedroom nearby.

It was after midnight when I awakened. I had slept uneasily, perhaps the stimulus of Jimmy's exciting news. What woke me up, I do not know. I started into full wakefulness, and at once became aware that Rowena was not beside me.

The room was cold, the house wholly silent. Through the drawn window blinds faint shafts of moonlight were straggling. Rowena's negligee was gone from the chair beside our bed.

I lay listening in the silence. The door to the living room was open; a log in the dying fire fell with a sound startlingly loud.

And then I heard something that set me shuddering, and took me out of bed with a bound. A crunching in the snow outside the cabin! Footsteps! And, it seemed, low murmurs of voices!

I reached the living room. The waning fire illuminated it with flickering yellow light and waving shadows. A shaft of moonlight showed me that the outer door was open; it hung askew on its hinges, the top one broken so that it dangled forward into the room!

My confusion lasted no more than a moment, however. I found myself shouting, "Rowena! Guy!"

At the door I saw a trail of footprints in the snow. Not our beaten path to the lake. These led sidewise toward a line of naked trees. I thought that in the moonlight there were dark blobs of retreating figures off there!

The frosty outer air struck at me as I stood thinly clad. Our overcoats hung on pegs near the living room door. I recall donning a heavy coat and pulling boots over my bare feet.

My shouts brought the household. A confusion of figures and voices.

"Jack! What the devil—"

"Jack—"

Guy and Toh were plucking at me. Then Toh saw the broken door.

"Oh—" He darted at it. Stooped. Straightened. "Burned! The hinges burned with a heat-ray! Where is Tama?"

Guy and Toh were here! But not Rowena! Not Tama! The housekeeper appeared; stood stricken with terror. "Mr. Jack, what is it? Tell me! What's wrong? What—"

I ran outside. The distant figures had vanished. In the house the voices and tramping steps of Guy and Toh resounded.

Guy shouted, "Tama! Rowena! Tama, where are you?" Guy met me at the doorway; his face was livid in the moonlight.

"Gone! They're not here!"

Eliza was screaming with shrill, hysterical wails.

I gasped, "I think I saw them out there among the trees!"

We seized our large-bore rifles, which stood in a corner of the room. Guy and Toh drew on overcoats and boots.

In a moment we started. The moon went under a passing cloud. The white snow surface turned dark gray, but the trail was plain. A wide, scuffed path, many footsteps. The edge of the forest was a few hundred feet away. We were half running. I suddenly realized, heedlessly running—

I stopped, and drew Guy and Toh crouching beside me behind the huge bulk of a fallen tree.

"Wait! They must be close ahead. I saw them!" We could not fire on any distant figure, with the girls possibly among them.

Toh murmured, "It must be Mercurians!"

"They can't travel fast," I whispered. "The earth's gravity is too great. If we can decide their direction, then circle and get ahead of them—"

I checked my words. Beside me in the snow, almost at my feet, a dark object was lying. I reached for it. A torn piece of cloth. There was light enough for me to see it. A portion of a man's coat sleeve. The wrist cuff had some insignia on it. It was queerly burned, blackened where a segment of it had been melted away by a blast of heat.

It was from the uniform of Jimmy Turk!

I had no time to do more than show it to Guy and Toh. The Mercurians had seen us. From the edge of the nearby forest a narrow beam of blue-green light came with a hiss, like a tiny lightning bolt darting over us. It caught a snowdrift twenty feet away; melted a hole like a clean-bored tunnel with vapor rising from it.

I leaped up, against the efforts of Toh and Guy to pull me down. A figure stood at the forest edge—the bundled shape of a man in animal skins. I shot. My rifle stabbed its spurt of yellow flame. The report echoed in the still night air over the frozen lake.

But my shot never reached its intended mark.

From my adversary the blue-green beam came again. By chance it must have met my bullet. A puff of fire showed in mid-air as the steel-tipped missile melted into burning gas and ashes.

The scientist hastened away and boarded the Cube, mounting to the second of its three interior tiers, to stand at one of the bull's-eye windows of its narrow, corridor-like enclosed deck.

And Guy burst out, "If they'd only let us help them! Do something. God, this delay—"

The dawn was just coming when we left the earth, pursuing the silver ball into space.

CHAPTER II. AN UNKNOWN VOICE

FROM WHAT Jimmy afterward told me, I can construct a picture of what happened to him from the time he left us that noon of March 15. From our secluded camp he flew his dragon directly back to Boston. His little monoplane—the fleetest, most agile type of flyer of its day—mounted high into the clouds. Jimmy was taking no chances that a newscaster's plane might be on the lookout for him, guess that he had been visiting us, and thus reveal our vicinity.

The dragon had its own insignia in chameleon letters on its underwing surface, but Jimmy could light the wings to show other official insignia.

When he left our cottage his wings bore a naval device. His plane, constructed for instant camouflage, dangled a false landing gear, and wore wide, spreading false upper wings. No observer at a distance could have guessed it was Jimmy's dragon.

He mounted to high altitudes, changed the angles of incidence of his wing surfaces, switched the pressure air into his carburetor for rarified flying, and kept mounting. At sixty thousand feet he swung southeast toward Boston.

"Coming," he told the chief over the ether-phone. "Be there in an hour."

Over Boston he nosed down. The false plane-shape ribs were folded. The camouflaged landing gear had been drawn up. His wing surfaces carried his own familiar device.

He landed on the Commonwealth Building; descended to his office, dispatched his routine work.

At about two o'clock his televisor phone puzzled.

"James Turk speaking. Interstate Patrol, New England, Division Four. Who wants me?"

The call-sorter's voice answered him. "Someone wants you through the Bangor Broadcasting Studio. Do you accept the call, please?"

"Plug 'em in," said Jimmy.

"I would speak to Jimmy Turk," came a soft, low-spoken man's voice.

"I'm Turk. Who are you? Where's your image?"

The sorter cut in. "I can't get his image, Mr. Turk."

"Let him come through without it."

The soft voice sounded: "I—you do not know me. I am a friend of Rowena."

"Rowena?"

Was this some hoax? Some newscaster trying to work a game on him?

"Rowena," the voice barely whispered, "is in danger—great danger. And Tama—you know Tama—"

"Who in the devil are you?" Jimmy bent at his sending grid with tense vehemence.

"A friend." The voice now spoke with furtive swiftness. "Rowena and Tama—they are together? Both in

the same place?"

"None of your damned business!"

"They are in danger. I do not ask you to go to them. Come to me."

Jimmy still thought it was a hoax; but in spite of himself his heart was thumping.

"I'm not going to them. You want me to come to you? Why? Where—"

"I will tell you of the danger if you will meet me. It must be secret."

"Where will I meet you?"

"Moosehead Lake, in Maine." The voice was intensely earnest. "There is a landing field—M 56—and another landing field—M 57. From the air a line connecting them would cross a north *arm* of that lake. I will be where it crosses the lakeshore."

"When?"

"In an hour."

"I'll come," Jimmy agreed. "And look here, if this is some damned newscaster's joke, I'll slam you into pulp."

"Danger is no joke. You will come alone? If you do not, you will never find me."

"Don't worry—I'll come alone."

They broke connection. Jimmy left orders to trace the call, and in five minutes had his dragon in the air. Jimmy Turk was afraid of nothing. His worst fault was that he was too hasty, heedless. There was a chance that one of the many criminals with whom he constantly dealt was using this method of luring him to a lonely spot. But a landing on Moosehead Lake in broad daylight was nothing in Jimmy's life; and his dragon was nimble as a Rea and a veritable arsenal of weapons.

Nevertheless, as he approached the rendezvous, he flew high, gazing cautiously down, sweeping his binoculars over the white, frozen landscape. The afternoon sun was shining. The forest stretched white, with sharp black shadows; every twig of the underbrush was touched with winter's fairy fingers, glittering in the sunlight.

He could see, some ten miles apart, the two landing fields which the unknown voice had named—the hangars, repair shops, and the towns nearby. Mentally he drew a line connecting them.

Jimmy made a wide circle. There were a few towns, shapeless in the snow, overhead an occasional plane, and camps in the forest, most of them deserted in this season. The town of Quogg was visible, and far off to the south, a patch on the lakeshore marked the snow-piled site of the White Summer Camp for Girls, where the Mercurian invaders had made their first raid the summer before.

Jimmy saw nothing suspicious. The designated spot was obvious—a level snow field near the lake shore with the forest set close around it. A desolate, lonely spot.

Jimmy flashed on his wing insignia, dropped his snow-skid gear and descended. The dragon skimmed the naked treetops like an albatross, struck the field, slid its length, and stopped with the forest edge and a thick line of underbrush twenty feet beyond its propeller nose.

For a minute Jimmy sat in his little open pit, waiting. The forest was silent; the small open field lay blue-white in the sunlight, an unbroken surface save for the double track of his skids.

No one was waiting here. Then it occurred to Jimmy that he had the dragon in a wrong position. He pressed down his turning spikes, wheeled the little plane around, facing the open field for a quick takeoff.

Jimmy was alert. He was awkward in his thick suit, but he had flung back his face visor, taken off his gloves, and in his hand he held his automatic. As the dragon wheeled with its tail to the nearby forest edge, a figure appeared from the underbrush there. Jimmy did not see it at once; but he saw it an instant later when he raised himself cautiously up to gaze back over the pit-cowl.

"Hi!" called Jimmy. "Stand where you are—that's close enough."

The single figure stopped obediently. It was a small man bundled in a huge gray-white fur garment with a hood over big head. His pale face was uncovered, but his hands were lost in the voluminous fur.

Jimmy noticed that at once and ducked back of his cowl, clicking open a tiny slit through which he poked the muzzle of his gun. Down in the pit where he crouched, his periscope mirror showed him the standing figure. The stranger was only twenty feet away; the astonished expression of his face at Jimmy's actions was plainly discernible.

Jimmy called, "I've got you covered. Better throw your hands up. Up I tell you! I never talk to strangers when they bide their hands like that."

The man's arms went up. His hands were seemingly empty. His voice—the soft voice of the phone call said, "Are you Jimmy Turk?"

"Yes. What is it you want to tell me?"

"I cannot shout it. Can I come closer?"

"Yes. But keep your hands up."

The man came walking with a slow, dragging tread. To Jimmy's mind flashed the thought that he was a cripple, his feet laboriously scuffling the snow.

And then another thought came: a realization. Jimmy's heart leaped. His finger very nearly pressed the trigger of his leveled automatic. But it was not Jimmy's way to kill in cold blood. He shouted, "Hey there—I say, wait a minute! Stand still!"

The man stopped. He was only ten feet from Jimmy now. His hands were over his head and one of them flipped forward suddenly.

Jimmy fired. He thought he saw the man's knees knock together, an instant in advance of the shot. At the stranger's waist a spreading stab of blue-green light leaped out. Jimmy's bullet went into the light-radiance: melted in a harmless puff of ignited gas.

All in a second. Jimmy was aware of the tiny object the man had flipped, dropping into the open pit beside him as he crouched. It shattered into a tiny puff of light, almost invisible—colorless—incredibly bright. Stabs of pain leaped in Jimmy's eyeballs. The pit interior went dazzling white, then dark. Black.

Jimmy felt himself firing again, blindly. He blinked. The pain in his eyeballs was horrible—confusing, blaring. His eyes were open. But he was blind.

He felt arms reaching in to seize him. He swung up his automatic, but it was knocked from his band. Then something struck his head—a blow dulled by his headgear, but it was enough. His senses whirled; he felt himself falling backward to the floor of his pit.

CHAPTER III. THIRD DEGREE

JIMMY'S FIRST returning consciousness brought again those stabbing pains in his eyeballs. The white puff of light had caused only a temporary blindness: a horribly brilliant actinic ray which narrowed his pupils and paralyzed their nerves so that they could not expand when the light was gone.

The effect was wearing off now. He could see dim blurred shadows around him; and out of the shadows of unconsciousness the murmur of voices became audible.

Jimmy felt himself to be lying upon something soft. He moved his hand and struck a curved, smooth metal surface. He felt his head. His hair was matted with blood, drying now, stiffly sticky. A scalp wound where something had struck him.

He realized that his headgear had been taken off; and then that his flying suit was off. But he was warm, lying in some interior. His returning senses were clarifying, the sounds around him becoming less blurred. He could hear footsteps, and men's voices in a strange, unintelligible language.

Then he heard the approaching tread of heavy footsteps. A shape bent over him and a face took form—a woman's face with a wide, flat nose, flabby, sagging pallid-gray cheeks. Over her thick shoulder he could distinguish the arch of gray-feathered wings.

She said in a guttural, broken English, "You better? No hurt now?"

"No," said Jimmy. "But I can't see. Where am I? That man—"

"No talk." She pushed at him with a flabby hand as he tried to sit up. "You no move. He kill."

Jimmy sank back. "If he's here, you send him to me."

She straightened and moved away into the blurred shadows of the room. Jimmy lay motionless and felt his strength coming back to him. He felt now that he was capable of standing, fighting—

But he was still very nearly sightless, and unarmed. He felt his clothes. There was no weapon upon him. He was in a lighted room; several men were here. A room unmoving, vibrationless.

Again approaching footsteps. A man this time. As the face came down, Jimmy saw a man with a smallish face of perhaps thirty. His black hair grew down in a little peak on his white forehead to give him a curiously satanic look. Jimmy recognized the soft voice of the man who had phoned him, he was saying, "And you have your senses now?"

"Yes. What the devil do you mean by—" Jimmy broke off. That line of talk was useless. He amended, "You've done something to my eyes. I'm blind."

"That will wear off presently. Have no fear, I have not harmed you."

The man sat down beside him.

"Look here," said Jimmy. "What's this all about? Who are you?"

The man laughed softly. "My name you have heard, just as I have heard of you. I am Roc."

Roc, the Mercurian! Jimmy had never seen him before, but from Guy Palisse he had heard of him. He was the son of the giant Croat who had come to Earth last summer and met his death. In the Light Country of Mercury this man Roc had risen to be chief of the army in Tama's native Hill City. Guy had

taught him English, had known him for nearly ten years.

At Jimmy's exclamation, Roc chuckled grimly.

"You have heard of me! But you and Palisse, that Jack Dean and the rest never thought I would come to your Earth. Well, I came, to find out what became of my father and his spaceship—"

Jimmy interrupted cautiously, "Did they come to Earth? Well, I don't know—"

"You lie! You know his ship was destroyed. He was a fool to bother with your accursed Earthwomen. I told him so. I told him he was not clever enough to come here. He is dead now. Well for me, because it leaves me to be master of the Light Country ... He had another spaceship in the Cold Country of Mercury. It was nearly completed and I have finished it: this ball you are now in."

"I can't see a thing," said Jimmy calmly. "Where are we?"

Again Roc chuckled. "Hidden in the forest, near where I caught you. It is still daylight. We descended last night. For one never here before, I know this land very well. Guy Palisse was nice to teach me your language, and to draw me maps.

He seemed ready enough to talk. A conceited fellow, proud of his own cleverness; pleased on the whole that his father was dead. Jimmy could barely see him as a blurred shape sitting nearby. Roc told with bland conceit how he had crept upon a farmhouse not far from here, listened to its radiogrid. Every grid these days shouted of nothing but the Bolton Flying Cube; the death of the marauding Croat last fall; the hidden Tama, Rowena, Guy Palisse and Jack Dean; and Jimmy Turk, the patrol flyer who knew their whereabouts but would not tell.

Roc was shrewd, quick to learn; and he was fairly familiar with Earth devices. He had found no trouble in communicating with Jimmy.

"Well," said Jimmy. "You're a clever fellow, aren't you? What comes next?"

Roc retorted softly, "I want Tama, that is all. Your Earth does not interest me. I never liked my father's plan to populate Mercury with your Earthwomen. But the virgins of the Light Country are rebellious. They fly off in revolt if one crosses them."

"You mean, if you mutilate their wings," Jimmy put in.

"Clip their wings. I passed a law that their wings should be clipped. But that is not important now. When I return to Mercury, I shall be master of the Light Country. Everything is ready: from the Cold Country our armies are coming."

"When are you going to return?"

"Tonight, when the darkness comes."

"Well, I'm not interested in your Mercury. Suppose you let me out of here and I'll go—"

Roc suddenly gripped him with thin, talon-like fingers and a fair amount of strength.

"You are a fool! If I had weapons to do it, I would destroy this Flying Cube that dares plan a flight to Mercury. At any rate, your Earth can give me Tama and that Earthgirl, Rowena. There is a comrade with me here—big like her—who would like to see her." The grip of Roc's fingers tightened. "Tonight, when the darkness comes, you are going to lead me to where Tama and that Rowena bide."

"I don't know where they are," said Jimmy.

"You lie!"

Jimmy's sight was steadily returning. He was lying in triangular room which was evidently a segment of a small metallic globe. The metal ceiling arched concave—a dull white metal surface, with a small lens-paned window. It stood partly open. There were tree branches close outside dimly visible in the fading daylight. Other figures had been in the room, but they had moved away now. Their voices were audible through one of the interior doorways.

Roc leaned closer. "I am going to have trouble with you then?"

"You are, if you expect me to tell you what I don't know.

"We shall see."

Jimmy felt a sudden stab of pain on the upper flesh of his arm. A burning, blistering heat as though a small white hot needle had been laid against his skin and instantly withdrawn. The smell of burning cloth, his coat sleeve, wafted to him. In Roc's hand was a small black object the size and shape of a metal lead pencil.

"That is nothing," Roc sneered. "Just a hint. Will you tell me now where those two girls are living?"

Jimmy suddenly lunged. His flying fist caught Roc in the face. Roc went over backward, with Jimmy on top of him. They were about the same size, but Jimmy was far stronger. Roc's pencil-weapon emitted a tiny silent flash. It missed Jimmy. He knocked the thing from Roc's hand. His fingers encircled the Mercurian's slender throat, choking him; but Roc had been able already to shout. Footsteps were approaching.

Jimmy let go of his writhing adversary and sprang to his feet. The bulk of a giant man's figure loomed before him. Jimmy's sight was still far from normal. He ducked sidewise, trying to gain the doorway. A stab of light flashed past him; missed him. Roc was shouting, struggling erect. There were other men's figures.

Jimmy stumbled over something. Fell, with the curiously light weight but bulging bulk of the giant on top of him. He felt something damp against his face. The acid smell of a drug. His senses blurred. He went limp.

Jimmy did not lose consciousness this time. All his muscles seemed paralyzed. As though in some strange form of catalepsy, he lay helpless, unable to move, but with his eyes wide open. There was a blurred sense of sight and bearing. Blurred thoughts, as though something were pulling at him, striving to waft him off into a phantasm of chaos. He fought against it vainly.

He was lying on his back. They had shoved him against the wall of the room. Someone was talking nearby.

Jimmy fought for consciousness. He blinked. He could twitch the muscles of his face a little. Not quite dead! He could swallow awkwardly, with effort. His tongue seemed swollen, but would move.

Time passed. Jimmy suddenly realized that he had relaxed and floated off into a wild, drugged sleep. Someone had held more of the drug against his nose and mouth. He had a vague recollection of it.

The vehicle was moving now. There was vibration; and a humming in the interior. Jimmy thought he could see a window. Night outside; it seemed to be starlight. No forest trees. Only a field of glittering stars.

Roc bent over him. "Can you talk?"

"Yes."

"It is night now. We have ascended. Still over Maine, up about a hundred thousand feet. Are you ready now to tell me where those girls are?"

"No."

"But you know their location?"

"Yes."

A dull feeling of surprise swept over Jimmy as he heard his thick, toneless voice giving his answer. His brain was rational. He had meant to say, "No"—tried to say it, but the answer had come, "Yes."

Roc demanded, "Are they in this state of Maine?"

"No."

Again Jimmy had tried not to answer truthfully. He realized now that this drug which had paralyzed his muscles, his nerve centers, had also paralyzed his will. Against all his efforts, his answers were truthful.

"Are they in New York State?"

"Yes."

"Tell me just where."

Jimmy fought not to speak at all. He could feel Roc's gleaming dark gaze upon him—feel, as though it were something tangible, Roc's will dominating his own.

The Mercurian's voice was low and intense:

"Tell me, I command you. Do you understand? Command you."

Suddenly he heard his voice telling the detailed description of the location of the secluded cabin. Roc would have no trouble in descending in the forest near it. Jimmy gave all the details of the cabin's interior, the location and occupants of its different rooms.

Roc laughed softly. "Thank you. I hope there will be many times when you can help me like this."

Jimmy lay mentally exhausted. His senses were floating now and it was pleasant to be at peace.

* * * *

He came to himself with the realization that he was outdoors. It was still night. Snow was under his feet and a vista of open snow fields, with forest trees nearby. A thick cloth hood protected his head; the under jacket of his flying suit was over his shoulders.

He seemed to have almost his full strength at once. He was slumped by a tree trunk which loomed beside him. A giant man clung to him by the arm—had evidently dragged—him here. The man leaned down.

"You right, now? All right?"

Broken, guttural English. A giant Mercurian. Jimmy became suddenly aware that this was a familiar locality. He saw the dim outlines of a nearby log cabin, dark in the starlight. This was our cabin, which he

had left only about twelve hours before. He saw figures prowling outside it now.

Jimmy did not answer. With all his force he wrenched from his captor and tried to run. But his strength suddenly drained from him. He stumbled and fell in the snow. A flash stung his arm and burned his sleeve; and as the giant leaped on him and pulled him erect, a portion of burned fabric fell unheeded to the ground beside the stump. It was the cloth which I came upon a few moments later.

Another figure gripped Jimmy. A voice, in better English, said softly, "Do not try that." And then, "They come, Dorrek—Roc no need this fellow."

They had brought Jimmy out to revive him in the cold air, perhaps thinking they might need him to show them further details of the cabin. They hurried him now toward the nearby forest. Jimmy saw, behind him, a following group. He saw the silver ball resting in the shadows of the forest nearby. He was led into it, flung down on the floor of the same room where he had been before. The giant sat watchfully at his elbow.

Then there were shots outside, in the distance. A flurry of footsteps in the vehicle; excited voices. Arriving figures.

Rowena and Tama were flung down beside Jimmy. Roc's voice said:

"Guard them, Dorrek ... If anyone of you causes trouble, Dorrek will kill you."

The lenses of the windows and the door were slamming. The vehicle lifted, quivered. Outside the window, the forest trees were sliding downward. Then only starlight. The ball was making upward, leaving the Earth.

"Jimmy—you!"

The girls clung to Jimmy. The giant seemed to ignore their whispering. Tama had been caught by Roc while she was still asleep, but the slight noise had awakened Rowena. She had seized a long dressing gown and gone into the living room. Roc and his men had pounced upon her.

To Rowena's easy capture, Guy, Toh and I undoubtedly owed our lives. Had there been a commotion Roc would probably have killed us in our beds, but with the girls captured, he retreated at once.

"I told him where you were," Jimmy whispered. "I was drugged—paralyzed—I couldn't keep from telling."

Tama knew the drug. It was foolproof. She named it in her native language. Roc had thrown a cloak over her wings. She was shivering, but presently, with the friction-heat of the rapid ascent, the room began to warm.

"We're headed for Mercury," whispered Jimmy.

The giant abruptly leaned toward Rowena, plucked at her gown.

"You—the Rowena girl?"

There was light enough to see his face. A great bloated, flabby—jowled, hairless face of pallid gray skin. A wide flat nose with a bridge suggesting that it had been broken. He was grinning with a leer meant to be ingratiating.

Rowena flung off his hand. Jimmy muttered an oath, but Tama gripped him.

"Wait! He is a Cold Country native; perhaps a leader."

"You—the Rowena girl?"

"Yes," said Rowena calmly. "That's my name."

"I like you. I, Dorrek, master of the army when we capture Light Country. Soon now. And I like you. Big woman—beautiful. My woman soon—"

His gaze devoured Rowena's figure. Jimmy was tense, but a movement of Tama's directed his attention across the room. Behind the squatting giant, a heavy-set gray woman was standing. Her gray wings were folded behind her. She stood against the wall; the light fell upon her wide, flabby, gray face to illumine it plainly. It was contorted now with hate. The venom of a woman's jealous hate.

And all in an instant Jimmy realized that in her hand as it came up from the folds of her drab-colored robe, a long glittering knife was clutched.

The woman moved suddenly forward, uttered a piercing hysterical scream and with waving knife blade leaped at Rowena.

CHAPTER IV. ENDLESS VOID

I SAT BESIDE Guy in one of the deck corridor chairs of the Bolton Cube. A bull's-eye window was at hand. Earthlight and starlight, and mingled moonlight fell upon us—the great firmament out there blazing with a glory wondrous, amazing. The Earth hung fairly below our window. Tremendous, reddish-yellow ball, etched with the tracery of its land and water, mottled with cloud areas, white with its polar snowcaps.

To one side hovered the gleaming, sharply black and white Moon-disk and everywhere the stars blazed like points of fire in the dead black void of space. The sun was overhead. From this side of the deck we could not see it.

"How far out are we?" Guy asked. I had been to the dome-peak and just returned.

"About four hundred thousand miles."

"Has Grenfell's telescope lost sight of the silver ball?"

"Yes."

We had been on the voyage some ten hours. It was now, by Earth Eastern Standard Time, which we were maintaining on the Cube, about 3 p.m. on the afternoon of March 16th. The Mercurian vehicle had departed some four hours in advance of us and now it was beyond our sight.

"But Grenfell is sure we have been making as good speed as the ball," I added. "And he hopes to do better. We'll overhaul it in a day or two."

"If it heads directly for Mercury," said Guy. "But we're following it blind."

Through the window there was no movement apparent. The Earth and Moon were dwindling, but very slowly. The sun was growing larger. Our velocity was now only a million miles in about nine hours. More than a month to reach the sun at this rate, and something like twenty-six-thousand years to the nearest star!

For an hour Guy and I talked that afternoon on the deck of the Bolton Cube. We would overtake the Mercurian vehicle. And then what? There was a gun mounted at a pressure port on the deck of the Cube. But with Tama, Rowena and Jimmy in the ball, we could not attack it.

On the other band, if Roc had the necessary weapons, he was free to attack us. Guy felt, however, that Roc had no long-range weapons.

"It won't be armed," Guy insisted. "They'll have hand weapons—but that's about all. That ball was only a tender for Croat's ship."

* * * *

A day passed. Anxious hours, seemingly interminable. Our almost vibrationless little square metal house seemed hanging in the void. Everything remained almost the same. The Earth was still full-round, but smaller, with a silvery aspect mingling now with its yellow-red sheen; the moon, behind it, a tiny white sphere. Both were level with our side windows, with the sun and Mercury on the other side. Grenfell kept us in this position so that his telescope might most readily seek the Mercurian vehicle in advance of us.

The sun seemed a trifle larger now. The crescent Mercury could be seen only through the telescope. And

far to one side, the blazing point of light which was Venus showed in the telescope as a glorious half-moon.

Then at last we were rewarded. Five p.m. of March 17th, thirty-six hours after leaving the Earth. A shout from Toh resounded through the Cube.

"They have picked it up! It is visible—a dot against the Sun-disk! Jack, come up here! Guy—oh, Guy—the thing is in advance of us, but not so far."

We jammed into the little dome-room. Our velocity was now some five hundred thousand miles an hour. It had reached and passed the maximum of which apparently the Mercurian vehicle was capable. The ball showed as a tiny black dot against the flaming gaseous envelope of the sun's surface.

I faced Dr. Grenfell. "Can I see you a moment alone?" He gazed up at me from beneath his raised bushy brows. "Alone? We've no secrets here, Jack. What—"

But he left Baker at the telescope and accompanied me down the inclined ladder into the third and upper tier of the Cube. A small central room, with table and chairs, surrounded by a number of cubbies-control and instrument rooms. Guy had followed us, with Toh beside him.

I had a plan: wild, suicidal. All day the details of it had been obsessing me: I had been waiting for the sighting of the silver ball as the time to tell it to Grenfell. He listened quietly, hearing me through with only an occasional question. He sat low in his chair, his thick shoulders hunched, his eyes peering up at me; and only his thick fingers toying restlessly with the black ribbon of his seldom-used eye glasses betrayed his emotions.

Guy sat speechless, turning grim and white, regarding me with an eagerness almost pathetic. Only once, he spoke.

"Jack! I'm going with you! Dr. Grenfell, if he goes, I'm going."

And Toh protested the same.

We ignored them. When I finished, there was a tense silence.

Then Dr. Grenfell said, "That's all, Jack?"

"Yes ... Wait, Guy—" I gripped his arm. "Take it easy! Let's talk this out. Dr. Grenfell—"

He interrupted me with his slow quiet voice. "I think you could get there. The way you reason it, the thing is rational. But Jack, you could not do anything."

"Except yield myself up. But I don't think they'll kill me, and just being there with Rowena—Dr. Grenfell, she's my wife, don't you realize that? She—"

His gesture checked my outburst. "You could not take any weapons, or it would result only in arming our enemy."

"I know it. I don't want any. One, perhaps—a little revolver or a knife which I might hide. I just want to be there. It's when they land on Mercury—instead of Jimmy alone, it will be Jimmy and me to try and guard the girls and find some way of escape. Well succeed, I'm sure." I tried to be calm. "Dr. Grenfell, you can spare me?"

"Yes, I can spare you. But it may be suicide." He gazed down at his eyeglass ribbon; and then he looked

up with sudden decision.

"I can imagine your emotion, Jack. I won't keep you, won't try to influence your going," Guy insisted. "Two of us—" He stopped Toh from speaking. "You keep out of this. They'd kill you the moment they got hold of you, and you know it."

Grenfell shook his head at them both. "I won't spare more than one of you."

"But, Dr. Grenfell—" Guy began.

"And you, most emphatically, I cannot spare. When we reach Mercury, trying to plan what to do, whom do you think we'll depend on most? You, Guy! Isn't that obvious? There will be only eight of us here on the Cube, and of us all, only you and Toh have been to Mercury before. You think I'm going to let you try this mad thing? Lose you and your knowledge of Mercury? I'm not!"

He leaned forward with his hands on Guy's shoulders. Get it out of your head. The very thing you want, the safety of Tama, would be jeopardized ... Jack, if you insist on trying it, well start your preparations now. Toh, please—you're only a lad. I won't let you try this mad thing ... Your Moon-suit, Jack; we'll get it ready, test it out in the air lock. We'll overtake Roc's vehicle presently."

So it was decided that, I alone, was to undertake the adventure, fantastic, suicidal attempt! I prepared for it with outward calmness. But he who says he is incapable of fear is a liar.

Our vehicle was a cube fifty feet in each of its three dimensions. Outwardly it suggested a great sugar-lump, ornate with little windows, a doorway, a bulge around the middle which was the enclosed balcony deck. On top there was an observatory dome set like a tiny conical hat.

The Cube inside was a maze of softly blue-lit apartments of metallic walls, floors and ceilings, draped and furnished into a fair semblance of comfort. There were three tiers, and a balcony deck surrounded the four vertical sides of the middle tier. Of these four deck-lengths of the balcony, one was different from the others. D-face, it was termed. Along this fifty-foot length there were pressure ports—air locks projecting outward from the deck. Our single long-range gun was mounted at one of them. Others were for the firing of hand weapons, so that from the normal air pressure of the deck a bullet might be fired into the vacuum of space.

Grenfell added, "I've had the telescope on them. Not a show of anything at the windows. They must be avoiding each window as it turns toward us."

On the deck, three of our men were waiting to launch me off. Gibbons was in the dome at our telescope; Baker was in the main control room. They had all been alert as we overhauled the ball. Roc might have been able to fire upon us. D-Face was kept now fronting the ball, and one of our men stood alert at the long-range gun. Roc's shot, had it come, would have been promptly answered. I thanked God that such a thing had not been necessary.

Guy touched me. "Well, good-bye—good luck!"

They all chorused it as, with hands that shook in spite of myself, I bolted on the helmet, started my tiny motors, felt the suit bloating with its interior pressure. Through my visor pane I could see Grenfell's face as he stared at me. His lips framed, "Good luck!"

Someone pushed me into the pressure lock. The door slid closed after me. I sat awkwardly on the floor in the center of the little metal room. Through the transparent slide I could see the men's faces peering; and beyond the outer slide, which was also closed, was a vista of stars and the round gleaming shape of

Roc's vehicle.

The exhaust pumps were sucking the air from the lock. Currents plucking at me.

A few minutes later I was in a vacuum. I stood up, swaying unsteadily. There was a glimpse of Guy's white, anxious face. I turned away from it, faced the outer door panel.

It moved silently aside. The last swirl of rarified air in the lock pushed at me as it rushed out. I clutched the doorway, poised at the sill. At my feet a brink—a million million miles of black void and blazing worlds down there.

Once before I had found myself in a situation similar to this—a human projectile in space, detached, a world of myself. Yet now, for all my anticipation, the shock of it numbed me. A vague amazement of thought,

I did not fall. There was no sensation of falling. No movement. A suspension, as though with my body hanging poised in the void, my thoughts were also poised. A shock—but in a moment it passed, leaving only confusion.

The heavens slowly, soundlessly shifted, and stopped. The earth hung level, unmoving. I turned my head. The fiery ball of the sun was steady to my right. A firmament of blazing, unmoving worlds. And I now was one of them. Subject now, not to human movement, but to the laws of celestial mechanics. The finding of my orbit would be the result of all the complicated forces now acting upon me. Perhaps I could take the open trajectory of a comet; or the closed ellipse of a planet, or become only a satellite, forever to revolve about one of these greater astronomical bodies near me.

Time was lost with movement. I was a world which could exist a few years or hours or minutes, and then die, disintegrate. Poised in the infinity of Time and Space. Hung chained as a satellite to something.

I shook myself free from the confusion. How long it lasted I cannot say. I lay helpless, floating weightless in a weightless void. I could kick and flounder but could not change my position. I had left the air lock with a carefully planned forward dive. It had carried me, like a log floating in water, a hundred feet or so away from the Cube. My outward velocity had retarded.

Of all the myriad forces pulling at me, the attraction of the Cube was the greatest. Dr. Grenfell held D-face of the Cube with neutral gravity plates. The Cube's nearness checked me, held me. I sensed only the movement of my slow, outward dive; yet at that instant I was plunging forward with the Cube at half a million miles an hour!

The Mercurian vehicle hung before me, seemingly unmoving, some ten miles away. I wondered if Rowena had seen me leap—if she could guess it was I.

Then the heavens were shifting, slowly oscillating with pendulum swing as I picked up a rolling motion. I became aware that I was lagging behind the Cube, the beginning of a small velocity of my own—the making of an orbit. Soon, with these forces, I would be a satellite of the Cube with the lesser attraction of the Roc vehicle retarding me at each revolution.

Again my jumbled thoughts clarified. The air lock door at D-face was closed. I could see Grenfell in the lock peering out at me. I raised my bloated arm with our agreed upon signal that I was all right.

He answered it, and vanished. Another countless interval of time went by. I knew that Grenfell was shifting the gravity plates in D-face so that their force would repulse me. It was presently apparent. I began moving away from the Cube. Moving free. Slowly at first. Then faster.

The Cube visually began dwindling. The Roc vehicle grew larger.

I fell free. The heavens shifted. Then the attraction of the silver ball caught me. I went around it in a great ellipse. And with a slow axial rotation I was turning end over end, so that now the Earth was over me and then the sun—my days, which now were minutes or seconds of human time—and my year was now once around this enlarging globe.

I circled it several times in a narrowing spiral orbit, as steadily its bulk drew me closer. There were glimpses of the Cube, hovering watchful in the starry distance. I saw that my orbit was eccentric as I passed the side of the ball upon which Roc was using his power. Then I think he made all the ball neutral, for it drew me evenly inward each time I went around. I thought several times that at the small convex panes there were faces peering out at me.

The whole process took many minutes, or hours. I went at last with a curving rush at the ball. Struck its smooth gleaming, convex side. Rebounded, with the impulse of the air pressure in my bloated garments; struck again. It seemed like a fall: I landed with hands and knees under me, and felt that I now had a little weight: I lay sprawled, sticking outward like a fly upon the side of the sphere!

With the contact, blessed normality returned. Detached no longer, free of the abnormality of an independent existence, I was once again the inhabitant of the world.

The sense of human time came back to me, with human movement. I sprawled on the sharply rounded metal surface. I was on its side, but it seemed like its top, with the windows set wrongly and all the globe under me.

I lay for a moment. I seemed to weigh a few pounds. I began cautiously crawling away from the windows, and to my senses, the ball was slowly passing beneath me, so that always I remained on top.

My mind was working clearly now. Would they let me in? It seemed probable. I had a tiny revolver. It was hidden in one boot, inaccessible now; I thought that perhaps when they captured me they might not find it. And there was a thin-bladed knife, of a size that made a fair weapon, fastened to my outer belt.

I clutched it now in my gloved hand. It might be that in the confusion of my arrival some chance would present itself. I knew that with my more than six-foot stature, I had many times the strength of any Mercurian.

I crawled past a window. A face ducked away. I moved sidewise over the small lower doorway—an entrance that could not be used in the vacuum of space. I could not get in that way.

The pressure port was farther around. I was over its smooth, opaque panel before I realized it. Sprawling, knife in hand.

The panel abruptly slid from beneath me. I dropped out of the starlight of the outer surface and fell in a heap against an inner wall; then I dropped to a metal floor.

The panel slid swiftly closed. I was in a soundless blackness.

CHAPTER V. HATRED

WITHIN ROC'S VEHICLE, shortly after it left Earth's atmosphere, Tama, Rowena and Jimmy were sitting and talking with the giant Mercurian. He had told them his name was Dorrek and that he was an army leader on Mercury. And Rowena, a giantess compared to the women of Mercury, quite evidently attracted him. He told her so, in his guttural, broken English.

"I like you—big woman—beautiful. My woman soon—"

Then Jimmy saw, lurking in the dimness of the narrow metal room, the short, flabby, gray Muta with folded gray wings. Her face was contorted with jealous rage. Without warning she gave a scream and with a glittering knife-blade in her hand, leaped upon Rowena.

Jimmy had no time to rise; he flung himself, sprawling forward from his sitting posture. But Tama was quicker. Her wings were spread behind her on the floor. She half turned, raised one of the crimson-feathered wings and with a sweeping blow, struck Muta as she leaned down. Rowena had thrown herself backward; the descending knife missed her.

The force of her blow and the thud of Tama's wing made the woman fall. Jimmy reached her, seized the knife and wrenched it from her hand. Dorrek was struggling to his feet, shouting with rage and surprise. He clutched the woman, lifted her up, and cuffed her in the face.

Out of the confusion Jimmy found himself apart and armed. He sprang erect. Then, for the first time, he was aware of the feeble gravity pull existing within this Mercurian vehicle. To the Mercurians it was normal. To Jimmy, it was riot enough. He bounced into the air with his upward leap, and his head struck the vaulted ceiling. He fell back, fortunately on his feet, with the knife still clutched in his hand, and found Roc confronting him.

The small triangular room was in a turmoil. Jimmy had an instant flash of determination. He was armed. He would fight his way out of this.

But before he could translate his thoughts into action, other thoughts brought sanity. How could he fight his way out? Imprisoned with two girls in this silver ball hurtling through space! Jimmy's muscles relaxed. He raised the knife, held it out toward the astounded Roc, and smiled.

"Here's the knife, Roc. I took it away from that damned woman—she tried to kill Rowena." Roc took the knife, turned from Jimmy to the turmoil of the others. The woman stood sullen in the clutch of the angry Dorrek.

There was a confusion of argument in the Mercurian tongue. Then Muta was ordered from the room. The giant Dorrek, triumphantly grinning, turned to Rowena.

"That Muta—she be punished soon by me—Dorrek." He struck his bulging chest with a show of manly strength.

"Brave fellow," muttered Jimmy.

Roc said abruptly, "The end of that. She will not try that again. You, Turk, come with me. Another room—I will give you something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. So are the girls, I think."

"They shall be well cared for, have no fear. The Earthship, that Flying Cube they call it,"—he pushed

Jimmy toward the door—"I suppose it will be after us?"

"I suppose so." Jimmy flashed a farewell look to Rowena and Tama as he let Roc lead him away.

This, by Earth-time, was shortly after dawn of March 16th, about the time our Cube was leaving the earth. Jimmy was confined in a small three-sided room. He could see that the ball was divided into two stories. A raised base-floor perhaps a third up the vertical height gave a level area for the bottom of the lower tier of rooms. The space beneath it—a single bowl-shaped room—held the ball's driving mechanisms. The lower tier was cut into triangular rooms, like slices of pie. The upper tier was the same—two triangular sleeping rooms, the others housing operating instruments and controls.

It was to this upper tier, up a steep metal ladder, that Roc now pushed Jimmy ahead of him. They entered a small triangular room. Wall and ceiling one continuous curve, which was the outer side of the ball; the other walls converging to a point at the ball's center.

Jimmy stood gazing around. The room was dimly lighted by starlight and Earthlight streaming in its single window.

"So this is where I bunk down? Do I eat in here?"

"Yes."

It was a comfortable though very small room. There was a low, bunk-like couch on the floor set under the bull's-eye window. A low, curiously-shaped table, a wide-armed metal seat, and an animalskin rug were on the floor. One side wall was blank; the other held the small door-slide through which they had entered. Roc turned toward it.

"I will send you food, or bring it."

"Much obliged." Jimmy took a step and gripped his captor. "Say, what are you going to do with us?"

Roc eyed him. The fellow's queer satanic look with his thin pale face and that peak of black hair down on his forehead was accentuated now by an ironic smile.

"You can follow me in our great conquest of Mercury, the Light Country." He checked himself suddenly. "You ask too many questions"

But Jimmy gripped him again. "I don't give a damn about your Mercury. Except for Tama—"

"Tama is mine!" The irony left Roc's face. "It is you who are the intruder. You and Guy Palisse, Earthmen. Tama is a girl of Mercury, my world. I loved her years before you or Guy Palisse ever heard of her. Did you know that?"

His eyes held Jimmy. His voice was vibrant with the intensity of his emotion.

"You Earthmen would think to steal her from me? She is mine!"

"She doesn't say so. Look here, Roc, don't let's try to kill each other, especially about a girl who most certainly is nothing to me."

It flashed to Jimmy that something might be gained by talking. He added, "Get me some thing to eat. Bring it back and we'll argue this out."

Roc's look was gauging him. "You Earthmen are strange."

"That's our way. You help me, and I'll help you. I like that better than sticking knives into people. Do you realize that the Bolton Cube will probably be after us by now?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know all about the Flying Cube and what it's going to do to you, Roc. Get that food and we'll talk."

Roc did not answer. He went through the doorway; and Jimmy heard the snap of the door-slide as it closed upon him.

Left alone, Jimmy examined the room in which he was imprisoned. No way, apparently, of getting out. Much good it would do him, to get out until they landed on Mercury.

He went to the window. The earth hung level with it, a great disk spreading half across the firmament. The ball had now a very slow axial rotation. The earth, the moon and all the starfield slowly swung; presently the sun was visible.

Roc did not return. He sent in the meal. Jimmy confronted the sullen woman who had attacked Rowena.

"Where is Roc?"

"He no come. Not now. Once again maybe, later."

She put down the thin metal slab on which Jimmy's meal was arranged. She had left the door-slide open; Roc evidently did not much fear that Jimmy would try leaving the room. As she closed the door-slide, Jimmy called:

"Tell Roc to come in here!"

But Roc did not come. Jimmy had no way of calculating the time. He slept, and Muta served him his meals. The ball's axial rotation continued. Outside Jimmy's single window the heavens passed in slow horizontal procession.

Then Roc brought Jimmy's meal. While Jimmy ate he squatted on the floor. He thumped his chest.

"Master of Mercury, and Tama my mate to help me rule it!" A crafty look was on the Mercurian's face. "I love Tama. It was a fortunate choice for me. She is leader of the flying virgins. They have always been rebellious. With Tama as my mate I can win them."

"Diplomacy," said Jimmy, "is a great thing. But maybe Tama is rebellious too?"

"I shall win her."

"Not force her?"

"No, unless she makes it necessary."

"What do you want of me?"

"Perhaps as what you call a hostage," Roc promptly returned. "The earth vehicle might attack us. They would not want me to kill you. That Cube is in sight now—"

"Is it?" Jimmy involuntarily turned to the window, but Roc stopped him.

"Eat your meal. It is not visible yet—only with my detection instruments."

"Will you attack it?" Jimmy held his breath.

"No. I cannot. And it will not attack me. That is one advantage of having you here. You and Tama and that big Earth-girl you call Rowena." Roc rose to his feet. "We will talk again."

"Sit down a minute," Jimmy urged. "You mention Rowena. What do you want of her?"

"I brought her," said Roc, "for Dorrek. Or at least, he thinks so." Roc's crafty look came back; again he lowered his voice. "I would rather trust you, Earthman, than any Mercurian of the Cold Country. This Rowena makes a good hostage now. That is what interests me. I do not wish to harm her."

"No, I believe you don't. But there's Dorrek—"

"A leader of many men, is Dorrek. I need them so I need him. Yet—" His voice fell still lower: "I have been in the Light Country for many years. This Dorrek—these eight other men with us here now—they are strange to me. I command them, because I am my father's son. But I cannot trust them. I did not realize it when we started for Earth, but I do now. So you see, Jimmy Turk, why I want to make friends with you? I am really alone here on this flight." A pulse was pounding in Jimmy's throat. For the first time he felt that he and Roc were talking without duplicity. A bond was between them. They both desired, at least, the present safety of Tama and Rowena. And they were shut up here with what Jimmy now realized were barbarians, savages of a strange planet. Roc was bad enough; but Jimmy realized now these others were infinitely worse.

"You mean," said Jimmy tensely, "he might slip a knife into you? Now that your father is out of the way, if he got rid of you, would he be the leader then of this invasion or conquest or whatever it is you are planning?"

"Yes."

"Look here," pursued Jimmy, "hadn't you better give me a weapon?"

"And have you turn it on me?"

"Don't be a fool, Roc. I'm with you—for this flight, anyway. See here, we're shut up in this damn little ball—"

They were startled by a sound outside the door. Roc's cylinder weapon sprang into his hand. He shoved it back to his belt with a laugh.

"Talking like this makes me nervous."

He and Jimmy were on their feet. Jimmy gripped him, whispered, "See here—those girls, don't let anything happen to them—"

The slide abruptly opened. It was the giant, Dorrek. What had he heard? His face was impassive as he stooped and squeezed through the little doorway. He spoke to Roc in the Mercurian tongue. Roc said in English:

"The earth vehicle can be seen now."

They went to the window, waited a moment for the ball's axial rotation to bring the earth into view. Jimmy stood gazing at the slowly shifting starfield; but he was very conscious of the giant Mercurian

beside him. Roc was undoubtedly an unscrupulous, crafty scoundrel. But at least one could talk to him, perhaps almost reason with him.

Jimmy's surreptitious gaze roved Dorrek. Six and a half feet—a gigantic hulk of a man, with a gray, flat, flabby face, heavy jowls and a broken nose. An animalskin was draped now across his bulging, hairless chest.

Other Mercurians crowded in to question Roc about the approaching Earthship. Men of smaller stature, but with the same heavy barbaric look that characterized Dorrek.

A babble of unintelligible Mercurian words enveloped Jimmy. Suddenly Jimmy thought of the girls on the lower tier. The woman Muta might be down there alone with them. He flashed Roc a significant look.

"Let's go down, see it from below. Why wait up here?"

Tama and Rowena were standing at one of the lower windows. Strangely contrasting types, these girls of different worlds. They stood with arms around each other. Rowena's tall figure was draped in the brown dressing gown; her hair fell in brown braids down her back. Her extended arm with the robe was thrown out over Tama's wings, enveloping the small Mercurian girl who leaned affectionately against her. Their backs were to the room; and its only other occupant at the moment was Muta. She stood against the wall gazing with heavy brooding eyes at Rowena.

They saw the Cube draw level and check its acceleration, sweeping along with them some ten miles away. They saw me leave as a tiny projectile hurtling toward them across the intervening void. Roc kept everyone away from the windows; he threw his mechanism to neutral so that the attractive mass of the ball might capture and hold me.

Roc had no way of knowing the identity of this emissary sent by the earth vehicle. But when I had closely approached, Jimmy could guess. He thought it likely that the personnel of the Cube now was the same as upon its first flight, when Jimmy himself had been aboard. And as my bloated, grotesquely helmeted figure now encircled Roc's ship, drawing inward until I fell against the gleaming side, Jimmy guessed who it was, for I was by far the tallest man on the Cube.

The occupants of the ball crowded one of its lower compartments at the inner entrance of the air lock chamber. The inner slide was closed.

Jimmy said nothing. He stood tense beside Roc at the gauges of the pressure port.

They saw my figure as I crawled like a fly outside the windows. I came against the outer entrance slide. Roc shoved at a lever.

They felt the vibration of the metal wall as I tumbled to the floor of the air lock.

CHAPTER VI. WEAPONS

THE AIR LOCK was black. I lay huddled on its floor. I could feel the air pressure coming into it. For a moment or two I crouched, clinging to my knife. When the air in the lock reached the pressure of the interior of the ball, the inner door would open, no doubt; and the Mercurians would leap upon me. I had an instinct to put up a fight, if I saw that Jimmy was free. It was a chance for us. But now I felt that it would be too dangerous, shut up here in this tiny world, to start acts of violence with Rowena and Tama aboard.

I determined to keep my wits, betray myself into no rash move.

I became aware that the air pressure was about normal. The tiny gauge inside my helmet, faintly illumined, showed 15.5. The darkness continued. But my eyes were more accustomed to it now; I could see the narrow walls of a small room. Where the inner slide might be I could not yet determine.

Another moment passed and I took off my helmet, placed it on the floor and stood up cautiously. There was barely room for me to stand erect, scarce an inch above my head to the metal ceiling. As I got to my feet, I realized they were maintaining a gravity much less than that of Earth.

A sudden slit of light dazzled me. The inner slide was opening. Air of a little heavier pressure rushed in with a gust. I saw figures: squat, heavy men in crudely fashioned animal skins. One was gigantic. Then I saw a small slender fellow who was Roc. I recognized him from Guy's description.

They crowded in upon me with a rush and jerked me forward out of the lock into a metal room which seemed brightly illumined.

But though I was dazzled by the sudden light, I could see enough. Infinite relief swept me. Rowena, unharmed! Tama and Jimmy—I saw them standing in a group in the midst of the confusion. And over the babble of voices, I heard Rowena give a single cry, instantly suppressed joy at seeing me, yet fear, too, for my safety.

I found myself standing alone, with the Mercurians crowding me. The knife was still in my gloved hand; I had held it in a fold of my deflated robe.

Roc confronted me. "Who are you?"

In that instant a score of wild plans flashed over me. I discarded them all. I smiled. I was holding the knife by its blade; I extended its handle.

"My only weapon. Take it. I come peacefully." He took the knife. "Who are you?"

"Jack Dean."

I thought that Rowena gave a cry of protest. I could see comprehension sweep Roc's face, but to the other Mercurians the name seemed to mean nothing.

Roc demanded, "What did you come for?"

"Peace. Not war." I added vehemently, "The release of these prisoners, with my promise that then the Flying Cube will never attack you."

Roc's face was impassive. The Mercurians were murmuring among themselves.

Jimmy said abruptly, "We had better have a talk with him. Another room, Roc, where we can talk quietly to him. Bargain—"

I was aware then, as Roc ordered me to take off the pressure suit and searched me for weapons, of the smoldering undercurrent here. It seemed that Jimmy and Roc were very watchful, not of me, but of the giant and his jabbering followers.

Jimmy added, "Can the girls come with us?"

Then I saw the woman Muta, standing with the smoldering dark eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

Something here—a situation unexpected, to me unfathomable. I sensed at once the menace of it. I stood divested of my pressure suit—but a hidden pocket in the upper flap of my high leather boot held a small revolver. Roc had not found it when he searched me. I could reach it with a single swift motion.

Roc pushed me before him, roughly. Jimmy, Rowena and Tama crowded after us. The giant tried to stop them. It seemed that every other man in the room was tense, as though waiting for some signal. Muta's eyes were blazing. Roc pushed the giant away, with a command in their native tongue. We went up a small inclined ladder to an upper level into a small room, and Roc slid the door upon us. I could sense the relief.

Tama held onto me. Rowena flung herself into my arms. "Jack! Jack, dear—you should not have come into this!" I kissed her, then pushed her away.

"Rowena!"

What words could tell what was in my heart? This—my wife—again with her arms around me. But it was no time for words, nor were they needed. She stood aside, her gaze clinging to me.

I gave Tama the message from Guy: that he would give his life to come to her.

The Mercurian said abruptly, "Sit down, all of you."

There was a low metal settee, and cushions on the floor. Roc stood over us, weapon in hand.

"You are Jack Dean, husband of Rowena here?"

"Yes."

"And you have come to rescue her?" He said it without sarcasm.

"Yes," I retorted. "But not with bloodshed. I promise that the Cube will not attack."

"I know that it will not attack so long as I hold all of you here."

Jimmy interrupted impatiently, "What's the use of sparring, Roc? Let me tell him our situation—" In a burst Jimmy told me with lowered voice. And he ended, "You, Roc, can't you see that Dean is a help? We've got to get out of this—not all get murdered."

Roc said abruptly, "I believe I can trust you, Jack Dean."

Yes," I agreed.

"He only wants Rowena out of this," Jimmy added. He flung a significant glance at me.

"And Tama?" Roc said. He was smiling again. A strange fellow this: I could not make him out. "You think I will release Tama? Is that what you came for, Dean? Your ship off there, threatening me."

"And meanwhile Dorrek will murder us all," Jimmy put in. "I'm not armed, nor is Jack—" I could have snapped that revolver out within a second, but I thought it best not to say so.

"If Dorrek knew I had given you a weapon," said Roc, "it would bring trouble."

"Then I'll keep it bidden," Jimmy insisted. "What weapons have you? What have Dorrek and his men? See here, Roc, you're a fool if you don't come out in the open now. Let us stand with you. Man, we're all shut up here! You're only holding Dorrek off by the grace of the Almighty—I saw his look when you crossed him as we came up here. And his men—every one of them waiting for his signal."

"True," said Roc calmly. "But they would not dare attack me now. They can handle the controls only as long as they do what I tell them. I chart our course, the navigating. Without me they would be helpless. When we get to Mercury—"

"The danger will come then," finished Jimmy. "But that doesn't help me now. Or these girls. Or Dean."

"Dorrek will obey my orders."

"Maybe he will, maybe not. Roc, you used a lot of weapons on me. That ray-weapon,"—Jimmy indicated the cylinder Roc was holding—and that light-bomb in my plane, that blinded me. And gas fumes—where are they all? Has Dorrek got them?"

"No." The Mercurian had been gazing thoughtfully at Tama. He turned abruptly to the wall of the room, pressed a hidden mechanism. A small slide opened. In a compartment like a little closet we saw an array of hidden weapons.

Roc moved the slide closed again. "Dorrek does not know this locker is here. Nor could you open it, even though you have seen me."

"All right," said Jimmy. "What weapons has Dorrek?"

"A cylinder like this. His men have knives."

"That's enough. Roc, if you'll give me and Dean each a cylinder, we'll keep them hidden, watch ourselves until we get to Mercury. Then you order a landing. That's when Dorrek will make a play to kill you. But we'll be prepared to break away—force a passage for you out of this—"

Roc was again staring fixedly at Tama. He said abruptly to Jimmy, "You spoke truth a while ago, Turk. My affairs on Mercury are none of yours. This Rowena—I wish her no harm, except that I am glad to have her as hostage so that your Earthship is not firing at me now. But there is Tama whom I love. I think I will speak to Tama a moment."

He stood with Tama across the room. We could not bear what they were saying, nor could we have understood it, since it was in their native tongue; but later Tama told me.

She began quietly, "You heard this fellow, Turk. He speaks with wisdom sometimes. He and I have talked much of you. He knows I love you."

He waited but she was silent.

"You have nothing to say?"

"No."

"I am planning a conquest of all Mercury. I want you to rule with me, and keep the virgins from rebellion."

"You want many things, Roc."

"Most of all, I want your love. This Turk has the wisdom of Earth. He says I should not use force against you. Perhaps now I realize I should try to earn your love."

She measured him, wondering if he were sincere. "How, Roc? By warring on my country? By playing the traitor? By mutilating the wings of the virgins so that they might not fly, and then to—"

"That was your own country's law."

"You tricked them into passing it!"

He waved that away. "I want not to quarrel, Tama. I am thinking of joining with these Earthmen. Perhaps hoping to win your love." His calm voice turned suddenly vehement, intense, and he seemed wholly sincere.

"Perhaps I did play the traitor. Taught by my father. I was only a boy, did you never think of that? I grew up, with my father planning a conquest of the Light Country, which had banished him ... These last months, Tama, while you were taken from me to Earth, I had time to think. And now I know that to win your love, to have you, is what I want more than any conquest." Again he paused.

"You talk very strangely, Roc."

"I talk truth." He smiled. "You are not a fool but a very wise girl. I will tell you more truth: My father assembled a Cold Country army. It is waiting now. Weapons, every scientific device of war. And even in the Fire Country, the savages are ready. Do not shudder, Tama. It is ready now, everything for the conquest."

"With my father's death, I should be in command of it. And now, because you are a wise girl, I will hide nothing from you. I say I will give up all this to win your love. I will join these Earthmen, get them to help us in the Light Country to repel the invasion. It will start very shortly." He paused again.

"Go on, Roc."

"You are charitable, Tama. You avoid saying the sharp things which are in your mind. You know—and therefore I am not trying to hide it from you—that I realize now I cannot lead the invasion. My father had all these forces under his control, but I have not. This Dorrek and his men—they are only waiting to murder me. If I escape them, and try to lead the invasion, it will be the same."

She said sarcastically, "And so, failing in villainy, you will try heroics?"

"Yes. But you must give me credit—I tell you frankly my reasons. And that I love you, as I always have, and that I regret the wrongs I have done."

She touched him. "I wish I thought you were truthful. But I have learned to fear your trickery."

"Tama, this time you are unjust. This time I will not change. And I think perhaps you might love me. Someday—"

They were startled as Jimmy darted suddenly away with a gesture of silence; he crossed the room on

tiptoe and jerked at the door-slide which Roc had left unfastened. Behind the door aperture the woman Muta was standing, bending down as though listening. She started backward with surprise, recovering herself and said in her guttural, broken English:

"To the Master Roc, say food is ready."

Her gaze swept the room. And abruptly she whispered to Jimmy, "I talk you alone, maybe, sometime."

"What in—"

Her face was inscrutable. She turned and left the room. Jimmy gazed after her with his jaw dropping in astonishment. "What in—now what in the devil does she mean by that?"

CHAPTER VII. MERCURY

"I TELL YOU, Jimmy, I'll trust Roc just as much as I have to. No more."

"Reasonable enough. But, Jack, we have to trust him. He's as frightened as I am. If we ever get out of this—"

Jimmy's smile was lugubrious. Five days had passed. They had worn our nerves ragged. The situation was the same within the Mercurian ball, save that every hour as we approached Mercury the critical moment when we must make our escape, or be murdered by Dorrek and his fellows, came closer.

And with it all, I could not bring myself to trust Roc. He had been allied to us these days by a common desire for safety. Yet, for all his words and his actions, I was mistrustful. Here in the narrow confines of these enclosing walls, he was with us right enough. But outside, free upon Mercury—I wondered. And I knew that Tama mistrusted him also.

The passing days seemed interminable. We were allowed apparent liberty of movement on the vehicle. Roc had given Jimmy and me each a small cylinder of the heat-ray and shown us how to operate it. We kept them hidden, and I still had my revolver, which even Roc did not know.

Outwardly we were Roc's prisoners. Dorrek and his men were subordinates. But it was all thinly disguised. The mutinous Dorrek obeyed Roc—but always with a sneering confident smile.

There were times when Jimmy, Roc and I thought that it would be best to rush Dorrek and his men at once. Kill them and have done with it.

We had for instance, little bombs of blinding light and fragile bombs with fumes which would have stricken Dorrek and all his men into catalepsy. But to release one of them here would have endangered or killed us, as well as our enemies.

Both Jimmy and Rowena tried to find out from Muta what she had meant by her queer hints that she had something to say. But her face was blank—exasperating. She had changed her mind; she only shook her head and would not answer.

The days passed. It was now March 22nd by Earth time. The earth had dwindled to a star, a dot of white tinged with yellow. The moon, to the naked eye, was invisible. To one side, Venus hung with dazzling glory, a trifle larger than she appears as the brilliant evening star from Earth. The sun had expanded to a great round pot of fire with flames leaping from it, slow streamers of flaming gas-tongues licking into space with a reach the distance from the earth to the moon!

Ahead of us hung Mercury—larger now, even, than the sun. We had swung in a line almost between the two. The bronze-red Mercurian disk was nearly full-round. Expanding hourly: becoming convex.

Other hours, and Mercury was a disk spread well across the firmament. Cloud areas hid the sharply convex surface. The Fire Country, facing us, was hidden beneath grayblack vapor masses. The great celestial ball here in space, was waiting to receive us.

By Earth time, March 23rd. We swung lower, with the Mercurian atmosphere in its heavy layers close beneath us. The world here under us now half filled the firmament. The sense of falling and traveling sideways was soon distinct—real movement now, to which our human senses are accustomed.

Gazing down at the great spread of vapor masses, I saw a gray-black tumbling sea, with rifts of fire in it—electrical storms tossing the clouds. Gigantic whirlpools of vapor appeared sucking huge circular

holes with tossing flames edging them. Leaping bolts of jagged lightning slit the atmosphere.

And then, a sea of mist, shining opalescent with the sunlight on it; and a chasm in the clouds, with rain beating across it, and the sunlight catching the raindrops, spreading them with great shafts of prismatic color.

There was a vast area where the sea of clouds hung lower to the fiery surface—a boiling, bubbling sea, the spread of a giant caldron with red-green volatile liquid boiling up its crimson sediment.

The surface of the Fire Country was seldom visible; but once, through a great rift, I saw a spread of rocks, peaks and spires. As the blistering sun-rays went down, diffused and radiated by the heavy air, it seemed that one of the mountain peaks burst with a jet of steam, edged with green burning gases. And then the clouds closed the rift.

We swept on, still above the upper atmosphere levels, heading toward the Light Country.

Grenfell had made sure that Mercury was his destination. And as we fell into position over the planet, the Cube drew again into sight above us, following us down. And then we plunged into the cloud masses. The Cube was lost to our sight.

Descending the atmosphere, a rush of new problems came to the interior of our tiny falling world. Roc was tensely active, giving orders for the handling of the controls, which Dorrek and his men anxiously obeyed. Jimmy and I, and the two girls were for a time, ignored. We made plans for escape, and watching the activity around us.

This plunge from the cold of interplanetary space to the friction-heat of the atmosphere brought the temperature controls of the vehicle into constant operation. And with the swift-changing temperatures, for all Roc could do to keep them equalized, came pressure changes of our interior air. This required skillful manipulation.

Dorrek and the others did Roc's bidding with an eager desire to make no errors. It was obvious that the safety of the ball depended now on Roc's skill—and Dorrek had not dared cross him. Roc had told us so with his cynical smile. But once into the lower atmosphere, with the door and windowports open, Roc would no longer be needed. Dorrek and his men could then safely fly the vehicle.

I whispered to Jimmy and to the girls, "Be careful, now! We'll land in an hour or so—make the rush. Don't turn your back on anyone for a second!"

We were in the largest room in the lower tier of the ball. Most of the Mercurians were dispersed elsewhere at the various controls. Dorrek was in and out of the room, relaying his orders. In a corner angle, Muta sat on a low settee—a shapeless lump with her deformed wings spread out behind her. Her eyes clung to us with that expressionless, fathomless gaze.

I had my cylinder in a trouser pocket, and the revolver in the flap of my boot. Jimmy, in his tight-fitting trousers, puttees, and thin gray shirt, with sleeves rolled up and collar wide, sat dejectedly beside me and mopped his forehead in the heat.

"Hot, Jack! My heavens—" I knew that he was tense, with his hidden cylinder ready for instant action. In outward aspect, to the gaze of Dorrek and Muta, we were docile prisoners.

We had found an opportunity of purloining a small knife for each of the girls. Even Roc did not know they had them. For use if the worst should come. I prayed that it might not.

We burst presently through the clouds. The landscape of Mercury lay spread in the half-light of day

beneath the ball.

We crowded to one of the window ovals, and in a moment Roc joined us. Dorrek, in command of the ball now, had momentarily left the room; but Muta did not move.

"I will open the door soon," Roc whispered. He gazed down through the window. "We are not far from the Water City."

I glanced out, but at once turned back. "Roc, is that woman armed?"

"No, I do not think so. A knife, perhaps." I strode across the room.

"Muta!"

She lifted her dark gaze. "What you want?"

"Roc says, go to another room." I gestured. "You go and make food for us. For me—hungry—"

She did not move. It seemed that the shadow of a smile plucked at her heavy, shapeless mouth. Her eyes, like vacant dark pools, gazed at me. Then she looked away. But she did not move.

"Do you understand me, Muta?"

"Yes."

Roc joined me and gave her a brusque command in Mercurian. She gazed at him sullenly.

Dorrek came in. I saw Roc hesitate. Then evidently he told Dorrek that she was to go. My breath stopped; my hand went to my hidden weapon. Across the room Jimmy took a tense forward step. It seemed in that breathless instant that the conflict we feared was upon us. I saw in the inner doorway three Mercurians crowding forward.

Then Roc laughed, waved at Dorrek and pulled me away. Muta sat motionless. The giant Dorrek's gaze swept us all. But he did not speak, and turning, he pushed his fellows back and left the room.

Roc whispered, "They will no longer obey me. You saw it?"

We went back to the window.

"God, I thought it had started!" Jimmy exclaimed.

To fire these ray cylinders here in these tiny rooms was doubtless as terrifying to Dorrek as to any of us.

"Open the door," Jimmy whispered. "Let's get out of this. Order us to land."

Roc nodded. "Our interior air pressure is a little low. In a moment."

Beneath my window I saw a great spread of naked landscape—the Light Country, fairest region of the planet! The daylight glistened on the naked surface of bleak, metallic hills. There had recently been a storm; the burnished hillsides were wet with moisture, and little rills and pools of water filled the rock depressions.

Desolate spread of landscaper, no soil, no blade of vegetation. The convexity of this small world was obvious. An undulating metallic plain, and off to one side a range of naked little hills, with buttes, square-sided, flat-topped, and spires like pointed minarets rising against the flat monochrome

background of the sky.

We fell lower, swept on at an altitude of not over fifteen hundred feet. Tama stood beside me. She gestured. "The Hill City is not far. And the Water City is ahead of us. They have had a black storm not long ago. See the water on the rocks."

We passed almost over a valley. Soil was there. Porous looking trees, suggesting a mushroom growth, fringed a little lake. There were small areas with a red soil plowed up. And set in a long strip at the bottom of one of the enclosing hillsides was a collection of little huts—crude habitations built of the porous tree trunks, thatched with huge, dried leaves.

A deserted camp. There seemed a litter of equipment lying abandoned. Agricultural implements stood in the fields where a vegetation growth had come up, unharvested, and died again ... We passed on in a moment once more over the metallic desert.

"That was one of our girls' camps," Tama said. "Abandoned when we returned to the Hill City. You remember it, Roc? You ought to—you drove us there."

The camp of the flying virgins. Guy had told us of those events. Only the women of Mercury were endowed with wings, and the men, by instinct, were jealous. Man-made laws decreed that at marriage the wings of a virgin should be clipped.

The revolt of the virgins, smoldering for years, had come at last. Led by Tama, they had pleaded for different laws. Instead of which, led by the sly Roc, the government had passed a new, more drastic law. Even before marriage, at the age of sixteen, the virgins were ordered to accept the mutilation. They had revolted, flown from the Hill City, the Water City and elsewhere, and established this camp in the desert. And then when Roc had proved a traitor, stolen the government secrets of war and joined his outlawed father in the Cold Country, the Hill City government had been repentant. Alarmed at the lengths to which it had forced the young girls, it had begged them to come back, promising them new laws.

They had gone back, just before Tama and Guy had left for Earth. That was the situation, all we knew of it, save that here in the silver ball we had learned of the coming invasion of the Light Country by the Cold Country barbarians. Whether the Hill City government was prepared for it or not, we could not say. Our duty now was to get to the Hill City and warn them.

The welfare of our own Earth was at stake as well. The present Hill City government would never make a raid on Earth. But if the barbarians were victorious here on Mercury, raids upon Earth were inevitable.

Rowena touched me. "Look off there!"

Against the distant sky little moving dots were visible: a group of flying girls winging off toward the Hill City. And down on the naked plateau, a few miles away, men were moving.

We came over the horizon to a new vista. Human figures moved on foot. Several groups at intervals, hastened laboriously forward. They were fairly distant, mere dots. But there seemed to be men, and women, and children as well. A cart or two drawn by peculiar long creatures close to the ground.

It seemed like a flight, a rout, as though these were refugees, with belongings hastily gathered in the face of some disaster—all heading toward the Hill City.

Then the horizon rim showed others—a line of tiny dots. Then several distant groups of girls, coming from the Hill City circling over the figures on the ground, and winging back.

They had doubtless seen our vehicle, and fearing it, kept well away.

This had come upon us all in a few moments as our flyer sped forward. I saw that Tama was white and grim. She stood clutching at Rowena, whispered to her. Horror swept Rowena's face.

Jimmy whispered, "What in the devil, Jack—"

Roc had not been looking out of the window. He said abruptly, "Our pressure is right. I shall open the door."

Dorrek was not here. Muta made no move. Roc unclamped the mechanism; the thick little panel slid aside. The air of Mercury surged in with a gust upon us: Moist, heavy air with the smell of rain and a hint of sulphur in it from the recent storm.

The change of pressure appraised Dorrek that the door was open. He appeared at once and stood gazing at us. The open doorway was near us all—six feet high, and half as wide—a threshold with a fifteen hundred foot drop do to the rocky plain beneath us.

Dorrek made no move. There came a cry from Tama. "Roc, look! The Water City!!"

Ahead of us at the horizon a low-hanging murky cloud had appeared over a range of hills, with what I assume was the Water City still hidden behind them. In a moment we could see clusters of figures on the distant hilltops.

A little blob of light rose in an arc, went over the line of hills and fell into the still hidden city. A rocket bomb! This was an attack! We all forgot Dorrek and Muta behind us Tama cried, "Roc, this is the invasion—already started. You have tricked us—tricked me again!"

"No, Tama. I swear I had no idea of this !"

He seemed to be speaking the truth. He swung around. "Look at Dorrek, Tama! If you think I lie, look at Dorrek! He is as surprised as I am."

The giant had glimpsed the scene through the window near him. He called Muta. Momentarily ignoring us, they flung open the breast-high circular pane and stood gazing with obvious astonishment.

The sphere swept on, rising to a higher altitude to pass over the line of hills. Presently the stricken Water City lay beneath us.

Fantastic, ghastly scenes unrolled to our horrified gaze.

CHAPTER VIII. WASTE.

THE LITTLE LINE of jagged hills had behind it a sheer drop of perpendicular copper walls, clean as though cloven by Titan's knife. Beyond them the contour was a wide-spreading, shallow oblong bowl, with gentle slopes undulating upward to other heights, at the distant horizon.

A small inland sea had once been here. It was gone now but, at the bottom of the depression, water still collected, making a little lake some two miles wide, with the city houses built on stilts and water trees—a spring-fed lake of turgid, warm water rising from the fire-heart of the planet.

The copper precipice stood against the lake; to the left it straggled into a marsh as the land rose up. There were fields on the terraced hillsides off there, spreading in a great semicircle beyond the lake-terraces of water and mud in which something like rice might be growing. To the right the lake drained in a slow-moving, sluggish little river that wound off into the distance between canyon walls.

We stood gazing from the window of the silver ball at a height of some two thousand feet. Gray-black clouds were over us; the scene was flat and dim in the half light of day. And the murk of gas fumes and smoke clung to the city, hiding it. A murk of horror!

We passed along the peaks of the rim at the top of the precipice walls. The figures of men were massed down there. A flare burst momentarily to illumine them. Men garbed in animal skins; men like Tilde Dorrek and his fellows of the Cold Country.

A giant projector sent down a spurt of light-fire like a lightning bolt. It split the smoke cloud that hung on the city. A rift, through which I saw a little group of thatched buildings perched like a cluster of birds' nests between the huge stems of water trees. A tiny segment of the city was made suddenly visible, with a tangle of water plants rising thirty or forty feet above the lake surface. The huts were woven into this jungle-laced platform, with oval mounds of thatch upon them. There were six or eight of them in this cluster, set upon different levels. Leaves like giant palm fronds hung around them, with interlacing vines, woven into ladders.

The heat-ray bolt hurled itself down. I saw the birds' nest houses wither, shrivel and fall to the water in a strewn little heap of wreckage. Human bodies were floating in it. I saw a woman with broken wings trying to flap upward. She struggled an instant and then fell back.

The bolt's duration was only a second or two, when the murk closed again. I turned to see Tama staring at Roc. Her voice rang with horrified accusation:

"That projector! You and your father stole the plans for those weapons!"

He gripped her. "Yes, I did! I'm sorry, Tama." He ended with a wild laugh. "Look—they do not know how to use it—"

I looked down on the rocky hilltop, where the projector burst into a puff of light. The figures clustered about it were gone. There was only a small blackened patch of empty rock.

We moved on, out over the city. Roc was laughing wildly.

"This attack! They should have waited for me! Or you, Dorrek!" He swung toward the giant. "You saw that? They are not ready—they do not know how to use their weapons."

Dorrek shouted an order to one of his fellows. Our vehicle swung slowly over the city, turning on its axis and making a great circular sweep. The scenes we saw down in the gloom were fragmentary. I recall

them now as a kaleidoscope of horror.

Men dying on the precipice top, and men fighting off on the distant terraced slopes. An occasional rocket flare rose in a slow arc and burst in the city. Brief vistas of shriveling houses.

Presently the rockets and bombs ceased. Grayness fell upon the scene. Then a wind from the distant mountains sprang up. The murk began rolling aside. The city opened to our sight.

The attack was almost over. On the terraces the clusters of men, and those dark oblong things slithering on the ground, began moving away. In the distance I saw moving dots in the sky—girls, who had flown up from the menaced city and escaped. And other patches, dark and leprous—boles where the black water showed, strewn with shriveled litter.

As the smoke swept away, we descended. We turned at the entrance to the little canyon where the river wound into the naked hills; and swung back. I saw, in the strewn river surface, blackened, shriveled bodies floating off.

There was a little patch of open water like a city street with tree stems lining it and the houses still intact. Something was still living, swimming down there. An oblong thing. It reared its head, came to a half-fallen tree, began climbing the incline of the trunk. It had a jointed body some ten feet long and myriad short, spindly legs. A round head, with waving arm-like antennae. A "brue"—one of the giant insects! There were some larger than this one. Guy had told us of them, how they were domesticated in the Hill City.

I saw this one leave the water and slither up the tree trunk. It reached a house platform, against which the top of the fallen tree was resting. A woman was lying there on the platform. Her wings were burned away, her body mangled so that she seemed even unable to crawl. But she was still alive, lying against the thatched side wall of her home. At her breast a white-skinned, golden-haired little girl was huddled in the dying mother's arms. The child's pale blue wings were flapping in helpless terror.

The giant insect reached the platform. Our vehicle had dropped so low I could glimpse its face. Half-human—monstrous. Its tongue licked out; its great slit of a mouth seemed grinning.

I heard the woman scream—a thin, racking shriek. The brue slithered eagerly forward. The woman tried to cast the child off the platform into the water. The insect caught it.

I looked away. Tama and Rowena were shrinking, trembling against me. Roc and Jimmy were staring transfixed. Mercifully, the ball turned on its axis. The window showed only a section of the city where all the houses were leveled and the blackened bodies were lying inert. I saw other brues: swimming—stopping to seize upon something—eating—casting it away.

Then from the distant terraces, where the invaders now were withdrawing, a shrill, mechanical whine sounded. A siren call; it sang over the valley and echoed back from the cliff walls. The call for the brues. We could see a hundred or more of them appearing in the wreckage. Swimming in the demolished streets, slithering over the marsh shores, and up the terraces to join their masters.

Our vehicle had been seen and recognized. Groups of men stood gazing up at us. A flare rose vertically up from them, as a signal.

The ball had turned toward the center of the city. It had risen again—an altitude of about a thousand feet over the water. Dorrek and Muta still stood at their window, engrossed in their thoughts.

I whispered to Roc, "Now is our time! Order us back behind the hills, the way we came. Tell Dorrek to land us there.

Roc nodded agreement. He advanced across the room toward Dorrek. Jimmy and I stood tense where we were.

I whispered, "Watch them, Jimmy! Your flash ready? If Dorrek rebels, we can kill him from here and hold this room against the others."

If only we had done that! And yet, Dorrek's men in the other room had control of the vehicle. The door was open beside us, but we were still a thousand feet in the air.

Roc, cylinder in hand, reached the center of the room. Dorrek turned to face him. Tama and Rowena had moved aside, closer to the open doorway. But closer, also, to Dorrek.

Roc gave his command. Dorrek stared. Again there was that instant of electrical tenseness. Would the giant obey?

He stared at Roc impassively for an instant—and then he leaped. My heat-cylinder was out but I could not use it! I held my impulsive finger from the trigger. With my left hand I struck at Jimmy's rising weapon, and shouted in horror to Roc.

For Dorrek had leaped, not at us—but upon Rowena! She had passed within a few feet of him. Like a huge leopard, without warning he whirled and pounced upon her and seized her. There was an instant when he was struggling with her, and with Tama. Rowena was taken too much by surprise to get her knife from the dressing gown pocket.

Dorrek's arms went around her from behind. As she struggled with him, twisting, clutching backward over her shoulder at his face, Tama came at them. Her knife went into Dorrek's arm. He shouted with an infuriated roar of pain. Muta dashed heavily forward. A sweep of Tama's wing knocked the woman back. Dorrek, holding the struggling Rowena before him as a shield, retreated against the wall. Again, like a wrathful, desperate bird, Tama with spreading wings hurled herself at them.

Within an instant the little room was a chaos of strife. Whatever plans we had were discarded now. No time to think, even to realize what we were doing. Against the open door, the giant Dorrek fought with the two girls. Muta had turned aside, crouching, watching. I saw her stoop for Tama's fallen knife.

Jimmy and I were rushing forward. Roc made a leap—then fell. Dorrek's weapon spat a blue bolt. It hissed overhead, struck the metal ceiling with a rain of falling sparks, crackled into the metal and was absorbed. I felt the heat of it; I thought Roc had been hit, but in a moment I saw him up again.

Jimmy and I did not dare fire. As we plunged those few steps forward toward Dorrek, Jimmy screamed a warning, "Jack! Behind you!"

Half turning, I saw three of Dorrek's men crowding through the doorway. One flung a knife. I turned in time to see it coming; the heavy handle of it struck me in the forehead.

There was a moment of blackness. But at once my senses came back. I was on the floor, with two of the Mercurians upon me. I found myself still clutching the ray gun. My revolver had fallen from my boot—was gone. Hands were plucking at me. A heavy shoulder pinning me, another body on my legs.

I lunged, twisted with returning strength. Above me I heard Jimmy's shouts, then Roc's. A turmoil of staggering footsteps; the thud of blows; the beat of Tama's wings; a scream. A man's scream of agony. The thick body of a Mercurian man fell on me and my antagonists as we struggled. Then another hiss over me: Roc's weapon, I thought. I saw a gray figure lunge past me, meet the heat bolt and fall.

A hand and knife came down with a stabbing blow. I jerked away from it, fired my cylinder into a flat

gray face bending down at me. The face went black, sank backward. The stench of burned flesh was around me as I heaved off restraining arms and staggered to my feet.

The room was crowded with struggling forms and clouded with vapors: the acrid gas of the bolts, the smell of charred flesh. The lights were out; the place was dim with the outside daylight. I stumbled over a body on the floor as I took a step. I saw the outlined window ovals, and the rectangle of the open doorway. Tama was there, in the grip of a Mercurian. Roc and Jimmy were rushing at them. I found myself reeling against Dorrek, who still held Rowena. We were in the center of the room. I leaped upon them, struck at the giant's face, and felt another antagonist thud against me from behind. Then a stab of pain as a knife blade went into the flesh of my shoulder.

At the doorway, silhouetted against the outside light, four figures were entangled in a struggling mass: a Mercurian man, Tama, Jimmy and Roc. They toppled at the threshold, the brink of a void with a thousand-foot drop to the Water City beneath us. I saw Tama and Roc go over the brink, and Jimmy with them!

The Mercurian swayed, fought for his balance. Jimmy's disappearing hand made a last clutch—caught the Mercurian's leg, and pulled him over.

The rectangle of doorway was empty. I struck again at Dorrek, trying to pull Rowena from him. The man behind me pounded at my head with a ray-cylinder. I crumpled to the floor as I felt my senses going.

CHAPTER IX. SUSPENSE

GUY AND Toh waited impatiently in a room of Guy's apartment in the palace at Hill City. Some twelve hours earlier, Dr. Grenfell had brought the Flying Cube to a safe landing. But they had lost sight of the Mercurian sphere in clouds of smoke and fog, and with it their hopes of finding Tama and Rowena, Jimmy and me.

"But, Guy, what are we to do?" demanded Toh. "What does Dr. Grenfell say?"

"What can he say? We have no idea where the ball landed. Girls have been flying here to the Hill City from everywhere. You must talk to them, Toh."

"I have! Always, none have seen it."

Guy seized the little Mercurian youth. "Toh, I'm as eager as you—desperate. Tama, off there somewhere—" He choked on his words.

They had reached the Hill City only to find chaos. News of the unexpected invasion from the Cold Country had just come, brought by girls flying from the outlying districts. The twelve hours that followed were a blurred turmoil to Guy. The shocked, frightened government of the Light Country they knew well—and his friendly companions from Earth with pleasure at having them as Flying Cube, with its earth weapons and its crew of five men, in addition to Grenfell, was an asset in the war.

Grenfell, as he afterward told me, was startled by this sudden crisis into declaring his Earth party as active allies and participants. His first instinct was reluctance. With scientific foresight he appreciated the new era of interplanetary relations, at the threshold of which he now stood as a pioneer. He was upon Mercury, meeting the inhabitants of this other world as a representative of the earth. He had planned coming merely as a friendly visitor; but it was unavoidable that he should not be in pursuit of Mercurian outlaws who had abducted an earth girl.

Grenfell was a forceful man. Once his decision was announced, he sat with the aged, impractical rulers of the Hill City government, doing his utmost to cope with the chaos of hasty preparations for defense into which the Hill City was plunged. Earth and civilized Mercury were allied against a Mercurian barbarian nation.

News of the advancing army from the Cold Country had come to the Hill City; and then other parties of girls had flown in to tell that the Water City was being attacked. Across all the distant copper hills refugees were straggling.

But the occupants of the Water City had been caught unawares. There had been recently, over all this section, one of the dread black storms. Whirling black clouds, so thick that the half-light of day became like the blackest of a stormy earth night. And a sweep of winds, and torrential rain.

The invaders from the Cold Country had advanced through the storm; when it had cleared and daylight had come again, they were infesting the Water City, surrounding it on all sides, men with deadly weapons and a hundred giant insects.

So ran the reports that came to the Hill City. The men and the married women, the children, the aged of both sexes—all these in the Water City would meet death. Only the flying virgins could escape.

From where Guy and Toh were, they could hear the turmoil of the palace overhead, and outside in the garden, the shouts of an excited crowd.

Guy leaped to his feet. "Those shouts—what are they saying?!"

They stood listening. The cries were muffled by the palace walls and blurred by the sound of rushing water in an irrigation flume which passed nearby.

"Toh, can't you distinguish?"

Guy understood the Mercurian language fairly well, but it was native to Toh. He cried suddenly, "It's something about Roc's ship!"

There was a doorway from Guy's room leading into a short corridor. They hurried through it to a gate which admitted them to the open, just beyond the garden wall. The garden was thronged with milling, frightened people. There were lowering black clouds overhead: aftermath of the storm. A deep twilight hung over the small lake nearby, the high metal sides of the water flume; and behind the garden, the outlines of the palace were faintly distinguishable with dim lights now in its windows.

There were high spreading trees out here, heavy with clinging air vines and huge exotic flower blossoms. Tiny lights showed in the spreading circular city. The crowd in the garden and along the banks of the small artificial lake milled aimlessly about. Girls were flapping in and out of it. Others were perched on the high side of the flume, and in the trees. Urged by men on the ground, they flew up to gaze over the city, and came back again. Or flew to the palace roof, demanding news from the men up there.

Occasionally dots in the sky materialized into figures of girls flying in from distant points. They dropped down into the garden, or by the lake, or upon the palace roof, and were immediately set upon by the eager crowd.

Guy and Toh stood gazing. Toh ran to a nearby group of men, then came back.

"They were shouting from the roof that the silver ball was seen passing over the Water City."

"Nothing else? Did it land?"

"They don't know."

There were other shouts. They stood momentarily alone. Toh added, "They say the Water City is wrecked, but the invaders have turned back—not coming this way. Grenfell is going after them with the Flying Cube. Our army is being organized."

"Then Dr. Grenfell will want us," said Guy. "We'd better go in."

They turned, but stopped again. On a little balcony of the palace a man appeared; he stood calling for silence, then began addressing the crowd. The Earthmen, with their flying ship, were going to lead an army to repel these invaders. There was no immediate danger; the enemy was all on the other side of the Water City now, apparently not planning to advance for the present. Mobilizing or waiting for reinforcements.

Guy and Toh listened. But Guy's attention was distracted. A girl came fluttering down from overhead and landed on the ground quite near them, falling into a heap. Guy thought she was wounded; she lay huddled, with wings spread behind her, not attempting to rise.

Guy and Toh ran to her, bent over her. A small girl, smaller than Tama; a frail-looking little creature, not over fifteen. Flowing draperies lay on her white limbs; her golden hair was braided and fastened to her sides; her spreading wings were blue-feathered. She raised her white face to Guy.

"Aina!" he cried. "Why? Aina—"

He and Toh knew her well; a girl of the Hill City. She had gone recently to the Water City to see the young man whom she was to marry.

"Guy Palisse! And Toh—my friend, Toh! Oh, where is Tama? We need her."

She spoke in English; one of the score or so of the girls whom Tama had taught. She was not hurt now, merely winded from her swift flight. She stood up, panting to get her breath while they told her how the Cube had come from Earth, and that Tama was a prisoner.

Aina gasped, "I saw it land! It was beyond the Water City, where the Cold Country men were gathering. I saw it come down and join them ... Guy, you knew my loved one—Jal of the Water City? He is dead! I was with him. I tried to fly up with him. I could not! I am too small—too weak—" She buried her face in her hands. "He—A brue caught him as he fell back into the water."

Guy held her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Aina."

She raised her face. "I know—this is not the time for crying—"

"No, Aina, we must think of the living." Decision came to Guy. "Aina, will you help us?"

She was suddenly calm. "What can I do?"

"Are you strong enough to fly now?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Do you know where there is a platform large enough to carry Toh and me and two or three others, if we can rescue them? Can you get a few girls—as many as the platform needs to bear it—perhaps ten?"

"And have them bring it here?"

"No, we would be seen—too many questions. Take it—"

Toh interrupted. "I will tell you where to take it." He named a distant point of the city. "There may not be anyone there now."

"Yes," agreed Guy. "We'll meet you there. Soon?"

"I can have it before you can get there."

She spread her wings, leaped, and flapped upward past the tree branches and was gone.

Guy had no definite plan; he would make one as they went.

"Toh, we can get near the ball, creep up on it through the Water City marshes, if only the weather will stay dark."

"If we could get weapons—"

They were both unarmed except for small knives. Guy said, "I'll get them now from Grenfell."

It occurred to him that Grenfell might stop their going. But he realized that the scientist must be told about the landing of the ball.

"Listen—that man up there!" Toh's voice was eager.

From the balcony of the palace the Mercurian official was still haranguing the crowd. Other girls reported having seen the silver ball. The man on the balcony was saying that it had gone now, off over the dark mountains toward the Cold Country.

"That might be true or it might not," Guy whispered. "We must go, anyway."!

Toh agreed. "Listen to what he is saying! We have time to get there and back before Dr. Grenfell will need us."

The speaker was announcing that the Flying Cube would soon be ready to start for the Water City, to make a survey and to follow the ball into the Cold Country. A giant ray projector was being mounted on the Cube, and defensive electronic barrage armament. Within a few hours it would be ready to start.

Guy and Toh departed at once, pushing through the gathering people along the lakeshore, they passed into the narrow city streets. By the Light Country living cycle, this was the middle of the time of sleep. None were sleeping in the Hill City this night.

Walking and running, Guy pulling Toh by the hand. They hastened through the city, ascending toward the distant heights beyond it.

As the clouds turned black the dim street lamps were lighted. There were lights in most of the houses. Toh and Guy threaded the crowds and attracted little attention. Soon they came to wider, deserted streets: A steady upward ascent out of the broad circular bowl, spread like a flat cauldron upon the inner slopes of which the city was built.

The street they followed was soon a wide ascending road, with spreading tree branches interlocking overhead; low stone houses at the sides, set in verdant gardens or patches of cultivated soil.

With the lesser gravity of Mercury, Guy could have run leaping like a fawn. But he did not want to attract undue attention. He held Toh by the hand, pulling him up the steep incline of the street. The houses were soon farther apart. Less soil was here; the metallic, barren desert land began showing. The street dwindled and was lost at the summit. Ahead was a tumbled region of pointed crags and strewn boulders—an upland desert plateau stretching away into the darkness with the black sullen clouds hanging low above the encircling hills. This was the highland from which the Hill City took its name.

They reached the rim. Behind them the bowl of the city lay with winking tiny lights like myriad eyes. Ahead there was a small level space strewn with boulders.

Guy gestured. "That's where you told her?"

"Yes."

They stood at the brink of a small canyon, a rift in the coppery rocks. It was some thirty feet wide and equally deep.

Guy smiled at his companion. "I can't help you over, Toh."

"No. I will climb down and across it." He started clambering laboriously down the broken side of the rift, Guy walked back, came with a rush, and leaped-sailed in a flat arc with spread arms for balance and legs hitched up, and landed well across the rift, where he stood waiting for Toh. The Mercurian climbed up, panting.

"Not in sight yet, Guy?"

"No—yes, there they are!"

The platform came sailing from over the city. A small rectangle, fifteen feet long by half as wide. Like a small raft, built of split, porous tree trunks, lashed together with ropes of vines. It had six-foot handles—sticks projecting out from its sides. At each of them a girl was flying, five on either side. The platform passed in a low circle, came down and landed on the rocks.

The two men ran to it. The platform had a low, foot-high railing surrounding it, with handles to which the riders might cling. The girl Aina was crouched there.

"We are ready, Guy. They would not let me fly. I am tired; they said I would hold them back. May I go with you? They will not mind my little extra weight."

The ten girls stood, eager with questions—a flood of them hurled in their native tongue at Toh. He waved them aside. The girls were all barely matured—red-feathered and blue-feathered wings, black and gold-haired. They stopped their questioning, and stood alert and grim. Little warriors.

The thought struck Guy and made him shudder. Frail, beautiful little creatures, these flying virgins of Mercury. For them to be embarked on deeds of violence seemed utterly unjust. Yet, with a flash of vision, Guy saw what was coming.

The girls realized it well enough. Their land—fairest region of the universe to them—was threatened now by an alien race. They had had differences with their own government and had rebelled. But that was forgotten now in the greater peril.

Guy was saying, "Yes, you may go with us, Aina. Ready, now."

The three of them were on the platform. Guy gave the command, told the girls the direction. The girls raised the platform by the handles, stooped a trifle, and in unison, at a word from their leader, leaped into the air. With wings beating rhythmically, with stroke set by the two leading girls, they sailed off toward the Water City.

To Guy, lying on the platform, it seemed an interminable flight. Yet in actual time it was not long—hardly more than an hour. The low, sullen clouds formed a leaden canopy overhead. The platform sailed level, creating its own wind in the heavy, sultry air.

A thousand feet below it, the bleak landscape rolled steadily backward. Copper desert. Sheets of burnished, wavy surface like a strange shining sea rippled by a breeze and frozen to immobility. Again it was broken by canyons. Sheer walls; a mist of vapor sometimes at their feet. There were small valleys, with water and soil and a little struggling vegetation. Others, incongruously luxuriant, with a rank, exotic, tropical growth.

There had been occasional huts, tiny clusters nearly always where the vegetation existed. Mound-like stone huts, here the half-nomadic rural population of the Light Country fought for meager existence. They were all deserted now. Girls had flown past with news of the invasion.

From the platform occasional refugees were visible—little groups toiling along, sometimes attended by a few young girls flying low above them. There was no sign of the enemy.

From here the valley of the Water City lay concealed behind the rim line of tumbled peaks with the precipice brink beyond them. As Guy had hoped, the semidarkness held; it had even grown dimmer. A deep twilight gloom now, through which the distant peaks were appearing, blurred against the solid dark

sky. The girls were tired, but they still flew in steady, orderly fashion.

"They were on this side when I left," murmured Aina. "On the heights. The attack was over, I think."

"But the main body of them were on the other slopes?" Guy demanded. "Beyond the marshes?"

"Yes. From these peaks they were going down to join the others. It was all so blurred. Smoke clouds, fumes, burning houses, smoke everywhere..." She shuddered. "I could not see much, so I did not know what was happening. I saw the silver ball go past."

She stared with eyes that now had no hint of tears. "I want now only to rescue Tama. To follow her, fighting these men who killed my Jal."

And she was only fifteen, with childhood barely passed! "None are down there now," said Toh. "No one along the rim."

Blurred and dim, the wrecked Water City lay smoldering in the night shadows of the valley. Vapors still hung upon it, and the heavy silence of death. Shadows down there concealed the drab aftermath of a thousand horrors. Occasional little red-yellow flames glowed, where charred, still luminous embers of wreckage lay strewn on the water.

The platform ascended, passed to one side over the dark and silent marshes, higher over deserted terraces, swept beyond the farther uplands. The invaders had been here; but they were not here now. From this height, down through the gloom, there was no sign of any living thing remaining.

"Well, that's the end of that," said Guy. Disappointment flooded him. A few short hours before, Tama had doubtless been here. But now she was gone.

It seemed obvious that the ball and one portion of the Cold Country army had met here, and now had withdrawn. The invaders, having destroyed the Water City, were waiting before attacking further. To follow them with the platform back toward the Cold Country seemed to Guy a useless undertaking. Yet he dallied with it, even though he knew his better course was to return at once to the Hill City, tell Grenfell the condition, and join the Flying Cube.

Toh had turned them back, directly over the wreckage of the city. They flew lower, by whatever chance of fate, Guy never knew. He was deep in his gloomy thoughts. Toh was silent, waiting for Guy's orders. Aina told the girls to return.

The platform went down in a long swoop. Guy came to himself, to see that they were barely two hundred feet above the water. The acrid smell of gases, smoke of charring embers, enveloped them. A turgid, rushing darkness.

Close under them, Guy made out what had been a street: sullen, oily water strewn with mangled houses; naked, blackened tree trunks standing like sticks with dark, torn ribbons of shriveled vegetation dangling from them.

A little further on an up-ended house, still preserving its shape, was floating half submerged. Its porch platform, now detached, floated like a raft beside it with a fallen tree holding them together.

Guy's breath stopped. Death and desolation everywhere. Things floating, gruesome, that once had been animate humans. Nothing alive now. Except here! Guy's hand clutched for Toh. The Mercurian saw it also, and the girls. The little segment of scene down there swept past; but the girls wavered and turned back to see it again. The platform lurched, swayed, and then was level.

Aina murmured, "Guy, you saw it?"

Again it was under them. That floating house—the raft—the connecting tree. There were human forms clinging to the steep-sloping rooftop. Humans, alive! A winged girl, with two men beside her. Injured, perhaps; holding with weakening clutches to the thatch of the roof.

And from the water, up the incline of the fallen tree, the hideous, jointed length of a giant insect was crawling!

CHAPTER X. BATTLE

AMID THE TURMOIL of the fighting in that narrow lower room of the silver ball, Jimmy momentarily found himself free of his antagonists. A dim chaos of horror was around him. The window ovals and the open doorway showed with the daylight behind them. And in the doorway, toppling as though they were about to fall, he saw Tama and Roc. They had flung off a Mercurian, who reeled backward and fell. But another was coming.

Jimmy rushed to help Tama. He had lost his cylinder, but he still clutched a knife. With it he struck at an oncoming Cold Country man, but the fellow ducked and avoided him. Jimmy reached Roc and Tama; they were confused, panting, and wavering at the threshold. A Mercurian struck them; Jimmy felt all three of them going over the brink.

Roc shouted, "Hold to Tama! Don't fall free—"

There was an instant of horror as Jimmy felt them going. He saw the void—a thousand feet down to the shattered bestrewn Water City. The gray man pushed them; and as he fell, with one hand holding to Roc, Jimmy reached up and pulled their antagonist out of the ship. He fell free, hurtling rapidly below them.

A dizzying moment of falling, with the silver ball seeming to leap upward. Jimmy found himself clutching Roc, who was holding to Tama. Her wings were flapping desperately. She was above the men, their weight pulling her down as she struggled to support it.

Underneath, Jimmy saw a blurred vista of the city, where a patch of water was apparently mounting upward. The body of the Mercurian was whirling end over end. Jimmy thought he heard the crash of splintering wood when it struck.

Tama panted, "Hold tightly! Come higher!"

Roc pulled himself up and Jimmy with him. They clung to Tama's waist, long enough to be free of her wings. The three of them falling, but not too fast—not if Tama's strength would hold.

The silver ball had moved on and vanished. They fell through a layer of smoke, almost dissipated, but thick enough to choke Jimmy. He felt his senses whirling. Roc was coughing, choking.

Tama's white face was above them. Her wings beating. Then there seemed to be purer air again. Beneath them Jimmy caught a glimpse of dark water, strewn with wreckage. It was rushing upward, close. He saw that they would strike a litter of broken wood. Suddenly he cast Tama off, and gasped, "Roc! Let her free!"

He seemed to fall more swiftly. There was a flash of uprushing floating logs—an impact.

Jimmy did not quite lose consciousness. He had struck a half-submerged log. He thought, a second later, he heard another crash as Tama and Roc came down. He went under water, entangled with vines and thatch, but he came up swimming.

Tama was swimming near him. Jimmy was conscious that one of his legs would not work. A horrible pain stabbed through it. But in this water he found himself buoyant. He saw something looming nearby, and swam for it. As he drew himself up he saw that it was the porch platform of a wrecked house.

Tama gasped, "You—all right, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

Tama was holding Roc, who was inert. Jimmy started back into the water. One of his legs dragged limp; the pain of it made his senses reel.

"Wait, Jimmy—I have him!"

They were only a few feet away. Jimmy helped Tama draw Roc's body up to the raft. They stretched him out, bent over him. He was unconscious, but there seemed to be no bones broken.

I have had from Jimmy the details of those hours he, Tama and Roc spent in the Water City. Tama was bruised from the fall, but otherwise unhurt. Jimmy's left leg was broken. Roc seemed without broken bones—internal injuries, perhaps—but he had struck his head in the fall. He lay unconscious for hours, with Tama and Jimmy beside him on the raft,

It was dark there at the water level. Nearer objects only were visible: a dark patch of littered water, a few houses, flattened, half-burned. A murk in the distance, with ghastly naked trees standing in the water like half-burned sticks; a distant burning house—a yellow glow in the thick turgid gloom.

There seemed a slight current to the water. Occasional blobbing things floating, drifting past. Charred, blackened bodies. A grotesque detached face under a tree. A human limb, torn and cast aside by a giant insect.

Nothing living remained. The smoke fumes wafted down with occasional winds; then up again. But always thinner, less choking.

"What shall we do, Tama? He may die—probably will. You're not hurt. You fly out of this."

"Not yet. I can't leave you now. Your leg is broken. You can't walk."

They were unarmed. Tama had flown around in a brief circle near them. She had come back, white-lipped, grim, with a queer look in her eyes which Jimmy could not miss.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

He lay on his side. The pain in his leg made it difficult for him to think. He demanded again, "What's the matter?"

Tama did not answer, but bent over Roc, who was still unconscious. "If only we could do something for him. Poor Roc! And you, Jimmy—doesn't it hurt very badly?"

It seemed that Tama was very alert, her gaze constantly roving.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded again. "Did you see any of the invaders?"

"No."

"The ball—is it still overhead?"

"No."

A mist rising from the water had closed around them; through it, the nearer objects standing on the water showed like phantoms. Overhead was a pall of darkness. Jimmy had been afraid at first that some of the enemy would discover them lying there, but now there seemed less danger of that. Tama on one of her brief, cautious flights had discovered that the invaders were marching off beyond the marshes. The silver

ball had descended to join them.

"We'll wait a few hours," said Jimmy. "If they're leaving, they'll be far enough away then. And you'll be rested. You can fly back to the Hill City to safety."

"And leave you? And Roc?"

"Well, I guess he'll be dead. And me—you can bring help. I'll stay right here, you can be sure of that."

Now, after another hour or two, Jimmy reiterated his suggestion. Tama ignored it and then said abruptly, "We are too near the water here. Jimmy, could you crawl? And help me a little, with Roc? Up there—"

An inclined fallen tree connected the raft with a half-submerged house close at hand. The house lay in the water tilted at an angle.

"Climb up there," said Tama. "Onto its roof. Then maybe we could get down inside it and hide."

"From what?"

She would not answer. They tried to get up the tree incline with Roc. But could not. And then, after another interval, Roc came to consciousness.

An hour later and they had laboriously crawled to the housetop. Tama had been down inside the house and returned with a single knife, as well as scraps of food and a vessel with fresh water,

It revived the men. Roc was weaker than Jimmy, but not in great pain. They lay clinging to the thatch.

"Soon," said Tama. "I can get you down inside. There is a place where you can lie."

"Then you get away. Come back with help. We'll wait—no fear we'll run away, eh, Roc?"

Roc said abruptly, "They were using the wild brues to attack the city. Have they all gone? None—"

He never finished. Tama had seen a lone, prowling insect a distance away when she had flown around, and had feared it would find these helpless men. It appeared now out of the mist; its ugly length slithering through the water. It saw the three figures on the housetop—raised its round head with a leering, monstrosly half-human grin.

Tama, knife in hand, crouched on the sloping thatch of the roof, with Jimmy and Roc lying behind her, and her wings spread over them protectingly. Roc tried to rise, nearly lost his weakened clutch and sank back.

The brue reached the raft where a short time before they had been lying. Its tongue licked out from its wide mouth-slit. With waving antennae, it crawled over the edge of the raft. Brown, jointed length with the water rolling from its shell, hairy legs under it.

Jimmy murmured, "Tama! Fly up! You fool—don't stay here!"

The brue reached the inclined tree. Came faster. Jimmy, looking over Tama's spread of wings, could see its baleful gleaming eyes, deep-set under the bulging forehead.

"Tama!" He tried to push her. If she fell, she would flutter away.

Far above them, the mist curtain had parted. Jimmy heard the sound of wings beating. A shape appeared. It was a rectangular platform, with flying girls bearing it. Jimmy stared, his brain blurring with

astonishment.

"Tama—look!"

Two men and a girl were on the platform. It came with a swoop. The insect on the incline of the tree trunk paused, and turned its face upward to gaze at this new enemy.

It was Toh and Guy, crouching there on the flying platform with the girl Aina. The girls, frightened and confused as they came down, fluttered in disorder. Guy stood up, swaying precariously.

The platform landed on the raft with a thud, which submerged a foot or two under the weight of the girls. Guy was flung down, but he leaped up at once, and Toh with him.

"Swim away—all of you!"

The girls were floundering in the water. Guy shouted at Aina, "Get the girls away from here—all of them!"

The brue lay motionless, peering around at the confusion; then it turned and began moving back down the tree trunk. The girls on the raft were fluttering up. On the roof, Jimmy lay behind Tama. He felt Roc gripping him.

"I can't move," Roc muttered.

"No," said Jimmy. "Lie quiet—don't lose your hold!"

The brue's head reached the bottom of the tree. Guy and Toh with drawn knives stood confronting it. Suddenly the great insect jumped. Not with a forward rush but with a movement incredibly swift, it flipped its whole length upward, head down, with the forked tail high in the air. It landed, facing the other way on the raft.

Jimmy saw the water on the raft lashed white, the great jointed body thrashing, lunging, with Guy and Toh astride of it, hacking with their knives. spurts of black fluid came like jets from its cracked shell, staining the water with ink, reeking in the air with a horrible stench. The screams of the thing were blood-chilling, gruesome. Its head twisted around. Its long feelers, like the tentacles of an octopus, clutched Toh. He tore at them with his knife. But they lifted his slight body in the air, flung him around, brought him down.

Jimmy was aware that he was screaming a futile warning and trying to crawl with his dangling leg past Roc, who was holding him and shouting, "Don't—you can't do anything!"

Tama was gone! Jimmy saw her go down with a swoop. Like a thrown missile, she struck the insect's head, just as he was drawing Toh toward it. Her knife, went into its face. The bulging forehead cracked—smashed inward like a broken shell. Tama, lunging, striking, fought to free Toh, and in a minute had him loose, fluttered upward with him. He was not injured. She dropped him into the water and swooped back.

The brue, with mashed head, its travesty of a face still bearing the semblance of an agonized human look, screamed continuously. Its great body lashed, writhed, squirmed. But aimlessly now, and with lessening strength. Guy still clutched its middle, hacking, tearing. It was as thick there as a stout man. But he hacked through it. The two segments fell apart, each of them writhing, fighting. Tama went again for its head. Toh came swimming, but she turned and flung him back.

Then Guy was at its throat, stabbing—hacking off the clutching feelers. Aina had been shouting, fluttering ten feet overhead, calling to the swimming girls. They shook themselves free of the water, like gathering birds fluttered up into a confused group. All unarmed, they poised; and then, at a word from Aina,

plunged down. Wrathful birds, picking, tearing, wrenching at the two lashing segments of the brue. Clutching its hairy, spindly legs. Twisting them...

The mangled insect's screams gradually grew less. Then Guy hacked through its throat and they died in a gurgle as its great round head fell and floated off.

Guy ceased his efforts. Toh swam forward again. Guy gasped, "It's over, Toh! All right—we've killed it!"

Then Tama got the girls away. Strange little virgins of this strange planet! Four of them fainted from the shock and honor of it, now that it was over. They were all livid white, and most of them were crying, half-laughing with hysteria.

I need not detail the reunion of Tama and Guy, and Roc's turning from an enemy into a friend, eager to help and to atone for his former treachery. Toh gazed silently at him and said nothing. Guy listened to Jimmy's explanations and glanced questioningly at Tama. Perhaps Guy was jealous. He need not have been, for Tama flung herself unhesitatingly into his arms.

Roc watched them with his dark, somber gaze. He sat up, bracing himself against the thatch of the sloping roof. He said quietly, in his precise, careful English:

I want you all to believe in me. For what I have done in the past, Guy Palisse, most truly I am sorry." He offered his hand, palm up in the Mercurian fashion. "Guy, will you accept me?"

Guy hesitated.

"I think it would be just," said Tama quietly.

Guy reluctantly smiled. "I'll try, Roc." He laid his hand on the outstretched palm. "It's not easy, at first. We hated each other for a long time, Roc."

"Yes. But that is over now. My country is assailed. I want only to save it. You, an Earthman, are here to help us win, and for that I am really grateful."

Guy stared at him, but did not answer.

It was two hours before the girls were rested and ready to fly back. The platform was cleared and washed clean of its stanching litter. Jimmy and Roc were carried down to it. Guy and Toh joined them, and two of the weakened girls. Tama and Aina took their places at the handles.

The platform rose from the Water City, to wing away upon its return journey. Presently they met the Flying Cube, coming to reconnoiter. Grenfell saw the platform, whereupon the Cube landed on the metallic desert. They all boarded it, abandoning the platform.

After encircling the Water City once more, the marshes and empty hills behind it, the Flying Cube returned to the Hill City, the Earthmen plunging again into preparations for the coming battle.

News had arrived. Dorrek with his silver ball had retreated with all his forces to the Dark Mountains at the borders of the Cold Country, in the dark, gloomy canyons there.

Grenfell decided not to wait for his advance, but to go and meet him. To cast all into one engagement: the old stratagem, so often used in Earth wars—defense by attack. To keep the fight away from the all too vulnerable Hill City. Defeat Dorrek's forces in one battle, in the wilderness of Dorrek's own choosing. And with his defeat, the menace to the Light Country and to Earth would be ended.

The young men of the Hill City were assembling into an organized army. Nearly a thousand girls were ready volunteers. With Tama's return, they hailed her as their acknowledged leader.

The Hill City arsenal and workshops were a confusion of activity. The hand weapons, the defensive armaments, bombs and rockets, giant projectors of the deadly heat-ray—all were hastily being assembled. Flying platforms were armed; girls were assigned to fly them and armed young men to ride them.

Three day-cycles passed. Dorrek and his barbarians were still in the distant mountains. Little news of them was obtainable, save that they were there. Jimmy's leg had been set by skilled surgeons in the Hill City. He could not walk; but he could ride a flying platform, and he chose it rather than be in the Cube. Roc's strength had fully returned. He had earnestly and faithfully helped in the busy activities of those three days; urged by Tama, the Hill City officials had accepted him.

In the half-light of a gray noonday, led by the Flying Cube, with Tama and her girls winging in orderly formation behind it—a group of armored flying platforms among them—and on the ground a low queue of young men winding slowly out into the metal desert—this strange army of the Light Country went forth to battle.

CHAPTER XI. MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD

"BUT, MUTA, I do not love him. That's absurd." Rowena gathered the long brown dressing gown more closely around her, pulled her brown braided hair from her face and gazed earnestly at the stolid Cold Country woman.

"Don't you understand me, Muta? I wish you no harm. I hate your Dorrek!" She lowered her voice; gazed furtively around the small room of the silver ball in which momentarily she and Muta were alone. "I want only to escape—to get away from him. Can't you understand me? You speak enough English for that, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand you. But you tell no truth. A lie."

"No—it is not!"

"Because you are beautiful—big—he loves—"

"But I can't help that, Muta. Don't you believe me?"

"No."

"But you must. You tried to kill me. I do not blame you."

"Ah—"

"No. Wait! I do not blame you, because you were jealous—you thought you had cause—and you love Dorrek."

The woman's eyes were smoldering. "I love—he my man—all my life since little girl. And I love—and for him—for him I work—always!"

"I know. I can understand." Rowena put a hand on her arm. "Sit down, Muta. You think we can be alone here for a little while?"

"Yes. It may be."

"Then I want you to understand me." Rowena was gauging her, wondering if she could trust this stolid gray woman.

"You do understand more English than I thought you did, Muta."

"Yes. My man Dorrek—he learn from Roc. Someday conquer Earth, Dorrek say. English—your best tongue."

"Muta, if you only would believe I wish you no wrong! You think Dorrek is—"

"Every woman love him at once."

Rowena laughed gently. "Well, it's all right for you to think that. But I do not. I—my friend Jack Dean is—" She checked herself. Did she dare tell this woman her real identity? How would Muta react to it? If she would not tell Dorrek—

Rowena added abruptly, "Jack Dean is my husband!"

"You're man-mated?"

"Yes."

The Cold Country woman stared; whatever her emotion, she repressed it.

"Muta, I tell you this so that you won't be jealous of me. He is my husband. I love him just as you love Dorrek. And we have never harmed you, Muta."

"From me, you took my Dorrek's love."

"I did not. It's absurd, I tell you. Not true. Don't you understand? I have my own man."

"I have Dorrek. But that is nothing to stop him—"

How often in life humor clings to the skirts of tragedy! Again Rowena smiled gently, and gazing, saw tears springing in the Mercurian woman's eyes.

"Won't you believe me?" said Rowena again.

"Yes." Muta bowed her head, dashed away the tears with the flat of her hand, and raised her face again. "You say like truth. But so beautiful, you—and I, now old—too much work too long, for beauty—"

There was a brief silence. The two women—so different, and of different worlds—with a bond of sympathy and understanding come suddenly between them.

Muta said, "If you not love Dorrek—still no difference because he want you, not me. And he real man—take what he want."

"True, Muta—that is the danger of having me here."

Rowena lowered her voice. The room corner where they sat was dim, and a distance from the opened interior doorway. The nearby windows showed fading twilight. The ball was flying from the Water City, back toward the mountains of the Cold Country.

* * * *

I had recovered consciousness after the flight in which Tama, Jimmy and Roc had fallen from the doorway of the ball—come to myself still a prisoner in one of the vehicle's rooms. Bound, this time, with thick, pliable air vines.

Dorrek had visited me. "You not lollod?"

"No. It seems not."

"That little man Turk, he killed. And Roc; they fall. Tama, she fly away. I care not."

He stood grinning. Huge, burly gray fellow, with his draped gray fur—a Hun chieftain, by his aspect. A barbarian, stupid in the ways of civilization, yet clever for all that. Dorrek's bullet head, his flat face, his giant stature were barbaric.

But he was something more, this Mercurian leader. He wore a wide leather belt strapped tightly around his heavy middle. Weapons were clipped to it. Weapons, not barbaric, but strangely super-modern.

He had brought his vehicle down by the marshes of the Water City. Had been welcomed by his fellows; had given his orders. We were now in the air again, heading to what destination I had no idea. In the ball

now were some twenty of Dorrek's men.

He stood over me. Evidently he was thoroughly pleased with himself and his affairs. Triumphant. He gazed down at me, his massive legs planted wide, his hands on his hips. And suddenly—save for the belt of electronic weapons—I saw him as a pirate captain of the Spanish Main, regarding a prisoner whom he soon would tire of goading and put to death.

Was that to be my allotted portion?

Dorrek said stolidly, "You are left to help me, big man of Earth. I not kill you."

"Thanks," I said. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Roc dead." His smile widened. "I lead the Cold Country now. They start the war too soon. I tell them that just now. We go back to the Dark Mountains, near my country. I want all my men, my brues. And all my weapons ready. You understand? We attack again. I talk the English tongue not too bad?"

He came and sat cross-legged beside me. Wild thoughts swept me. Where was Rowena? Was she unharmed?

I thought of escaping. Sitting as I was, so close to him, if I were not so securely tied I could snatch one of those weapons from his belt. Or smash his wide flabby face with a blow of my fist, or crush his thick chest with my encircling grip. I was nearly his own giant size. And no Mercurian in strength and agility could match an Earthman. Wild thoughts—

He repeated, "I speak English not too bad?"

I summoned my wits and smiled back at him. "No. You speak all right."

"I speak better soon. You will teach me, when I master of the Light Country."

That brought a measure of relief. He had use for me; and it was obvious I could play on it.

"That should not be hard, Dorrek."

"No. The Mercurian, he learn quick. The memory takes words and holds them. I want your language—master it. I have great plans. We build big race—giant people on Mercury. I kill—when I am master—the little flying virgins. No good. Rebellious, much trouble always. And little Light Country men, like the brother of Tama. He called Toh. You know him?"

"I saw him once on Earth."

"No good for breed new people. Men like you better—like me—and your women."

My heart pounded. "Women who cannot fly and be troublesome?" I ventured.

"Yes. Earthwomen. I like them much. Women like this Rowena."

I held myself expressionless. "You still have her here, Dorrek?"

"Yes. She here—I never hurt her."

"Earthwomen are not always easy to manage, Dorrek."

"This one—I manage her. Besides, she like me. I want my woman yield with love, not fear. Muta

beautiful once, but old now. Too much old."

I forced a laugh, and he responded to it.

"Your ideas are reasonable," I agreed. "Make this Earthwoman yield with love, not fear. You can't do that all at once, Dorrek."

"Not haste—my mind now only on conquest of Mercury." He touched me. "You, Jack Dean—I make you want to teach me the English without forcing."

He was far more clever than he looked, this Dorrek. He shot me a sidewise glance.

"You want I let you loose? Then you help me?"

I fancy he liked me because I was the only man near his own giant size whom he had ever seen.

He was smiling again! "You can no escape. Roc tried that. You saw him fall? You want not death? I loose you a little, Free to walk. Do what you like—here among us. I call you friend."

Then he was unroping me. Again I had that flood of wild thoughts. I put them aside—to start fighting now would only mean death for me, and possibly, Rowena.

I rolled over to help him untie me.

"Where is this Earth girl?"

"A room above. Muta with her."

I sat up, rubbing my arms and legs to get the blood back into them. Dorrek watched me; then with a sudden thought, he selected a length of rope.

"Only a little loose." Around my ankles he tied the rope so that I could take a short step and no more, and he tied my wrists about a foot apart. I could free myself, I knew. And Dorrek knew it, of course. But it would take some minutes, and I would be under constant observation.

He commented: "Just so. No sudden idea of flight. You understand?"

"Yes." I smiled.

He watched me as I stood up shakily, stretching my legs until I could walk normally. With the lesser gravity pull—it was Mercurian gravity here now—I had to be careful.

Dorrek stood beside me.

"When you hungry, you tell Muta." He laid his huge hand on my shoulder. "Too much bad, so big men like us not real friends."

"Call us that, Dorrek."

"If you real friend, sometime you talk to Rowena. Tell her Dorrek, he great man."

I met his steady gaze, and it gave me a shock. There was always a naive earnestness in this burly scoundrel's manner. I was shocked to realize now it was largely the limitations of his command of English.

"You tell her, "Dorrek he is great man."

He said it naively enough, but in his gaze I could not miss a hint of irony in the earnestness of his voice half-real, half-assumed. With a shock came the thought that this fellow was only making fun of me.

And then I thought that I was mistaken. He added, "You tell Rowena—someday I kill her and kill you if she find she cannot love me."

There was no duplicity in that speech, I was convinced. He turned and left me without waiting for my answer.

I was free now to move about the vehicle. As Dorrek passed through the interior doorway, one of his men appeared there and stood watching me. I was free to seek out Rowena. But though I longed to do it at once, caution held me. Dorrek might be listening. A surprised, incautious word from Rowena as I told her of my plan for escape—it was too dangerous a chance. I decided to wait, for a time at least. Until the vehicle landed somewhere, we could not even think of a way out.

The Mercurian in the doorway was eyeing me, but he did not speak. I crossed the room with my hobbled steps and stood at the window.

We were flying at an altitude of a few thousand feet. It was dark, but there was enough light for me to see the landscape beneath. It was changed from the copper uplands of the Light Country to a darker rock, sleek and glistening as though it were largely iron.

The sky was leaden. But as I gazed, with my eyes growing accustomed to it, there seemed a vague green sheen of radiance mingled with the clouds. Green, and occasionally dim shafts of a turgid yellow. The window was open with a small sill, breast-high, on which I leaned. A wind was outside; but I guessed it was only the creation of our forward flight. The night was breathless—oppressive. I thought suddenly of what Guy had told us about the black storms. Was this one of them brewing now?

I stood there perhaps an hour, watching the dim landscape slipping past: A dark metallic plain fluted with little rifts and gullies. It seemed steadily rising toward us. As the ball slowly turned on its axis, my view spread to the horizon over all its circle. A close upstanding horizon, black against the sky. The plain was gradually breaking into rougher country: deeper gullies, round black pits—unfathomable emptiness downward, and little crater holes, like pockmarks.

For a time it seemed almost a lunar landscape, as desolate, uninhabited as our frigid moon. I saw no sign of habitation down here now.

Then, in a little valley, there seemed a huddled group of mound-shaped huts. But the village was doubtless abandoned; there were no lights, nothing moving.

We flew steadily onward. Off to one side, diagonally ahead of us against the horizon, I saw a glow of red-yellow light. A crater pit, not dead like all the others, but with a fire in its depths. It came into closer view as we passed, a little glowing crater. It seemed almost welcome in the bleak dark desolation. It passed sidewise and went quickly down beneath the rising horizon as we advanced.

I was aware of the air growing constantly colder. And the night darker. Not so much because of the storm; we were advancing, I knew, into the region of perpetual night. The sun—if there had been no clouds to obscure it—would have been always at or beneath the horizon even at the Water City. And here, already it would have set, never to rise.

Presently, I saw mountains coming up ahead—black peaks—a great line of them stretching like a wall before us. The ball began rising. The mountains loomed higher, closer.

And then we were over them. I stood amazed, awe-struck. There is a terror to darkness—things almost, but not quite, visible. Shining lunar mountains are bleak and desolate, but the light on them brings a grandeur to the beholder, rather than a fear. But here beneath me now was a desolation fearsome in the extreme. Black bottomless canyons, incongruously wide for the sharply convex surface of this small planet; canyons with sheer black walls dropping into blackness; peaks rising like pointed needles; open valleys strewn with crags and boulders.

A ragged, tumbled land, rent and torn by some great cataclysm of nature. Once there may have been fire here; I saw a tremendous upsloping ramp of what might have been congealed lava; a cloven rock peak loomed at its summit.

We were skimming low, and now the mountains were around us. We swung into a deep black canyon. One of its walls, glistening black, slid past my window hardly more than a hundred feet away. Gazing up, I could see its straight edge against the sky and a towering peak still higher. There seemed a white glow upon the peak—some little light catching its mantle of snow.

The vehicle turned on its axis. Again I could see ahead up this narrow black canyon and see its floor now, broken and rock-strewn, as we steadily ascended.

The flight of the ball seemed slowing, Ahead I saw where the canyon narrowed to a mere two hundred feet, like the neck of a bottle, beyond which it opened into a wide bowl enclosed by perpendicular, thousand-foot cliffs. We sailed through the neck, out into the open valley. I saw lights. Dorrek's mountain stronghold lay spread here on the valley floor.

There was a step behind me. I heard a confusion of sound within the vehicle. Tramping feet. Orders. The hiss of the side rocket streams—preparations for landing.

Dorrek appeared. "We are here. You go above—friend Jack."

I followed him to the small ladder incline which led to the upper tier. It was the single connection between the two floors of the vehicle. He pushed me. A few steps up, I turned to gaze at him. He was smiling.

"You stay up there. I have men stand here so you not come down. Windows have bars up there."

"All right," I said. "Are we landing now?"

"Yes. My camp in the mountains here. We stay three—four of your days. Then all of my men are here—My brues—my big weapons. We go attack the Hill City!"

He took a step upward toward me. "You find Muta up there with the girl Rowena. You send Muta away, you understand? And you tell Rowena, I not so bad man."

I saw again that gleam of irony in his eyes. He gestured and turned away, and from nearby three of his fellows appeared.

I ascended. In one of the upper rooms I located Rowena and Muta. I stood unobserved for a moment at its threshold, my heart beating tumultuously at seeing Rowena again. And with a thrill, realization swept me: this was the room in which Roc, Jimmy and I had our conference. In this room, hidden in its wall, was the secret compartment containing weapons! And no one now in the vehicle—save Rowena and myself—knew that they were here!

CHAPTER XII. HOPE

"NO ONE COMING, Rowena"

"No."

"It must be here somewhere—a hidden spring, a lever or something. I saw Roc open it. Was it here? You saw him, Rowena."

"Yes, there—just a little higher. I think it was off to the left."

Rowena stood at the doorway, watching that no one saw us. I searched with my hands along the steel-paneled wall. And suddenly was rewarded. What I touched I do not know; some concealed mechanism. The panel slid noiselessly aside. I had a fleeting thought that Dorrek would have found this tiny arsenal and emptied it. But he had not. The cupboard shelves still held the rows of little bombs and rockets, tiny strange devices, the operation of which I had no vaguest notion.

"Got it, Rowena! Everything's here."

I put forward a hand the length of my hobbled reach to touch what seemed a fragile globe with a hooked lever on it. But I paused. If I were to clumsily set it off—this close room might suddenly be filled with a paralyzing gas or a flare of actinic light to strike me blind—

"Rowena, I'm afraid to touch the blamed things!"

But there were several hand projectors of the heat-ray; I knew how to use them. And there were knives.

"Jack! Quickly!"

I could hear the footsteps outside. I seized a small cylinder and drew the slide quickly closed. Rowena came swiftly on tiptoe to join me, and we moved away from the wall. The fastenings of the closing slide clicked faintly. I recall that I wondered if I could ever get the thing open again. The footsteps outside retreated; no one came in.

"Aren't you hungry, Rowena?"

"Yes. Shall I tell Muta?"

"If you can find her."

I had stuffed the weapon in my pocket. We were together in the center of the room. Dorrek looked in.

"Oh, Dorrek!" I called. "We're hungry—can Muta bring us food? We thought we would eat it here together."

"Yes," he said. His gaze roved us, met mine with his slow, enigmatic smile and he turned away.

This was a full day-cycle after the ball had landed in the mountain valley. It was the first opportunity I had had to be alone with Rowena long enough to get the secret panel open. We were both prisoners in the upper tier of the ball, though free to move about its several rooms. I had found them all with windows either closed and sealed, or if open, with a stout grid of metal lattice. And there never was a moment when at least three Mercurians were not guarding the lower end of the single inclined ladder.

This upper tier was infrequently used now. Its two control rooms were unoccupied and sealed. Dorrek's

men occasionally came up, but not often; most of the activity was on the lower tier, and outside. Rowena and Muta slept in the room in which the weapon cupboard was hidden, and Dorrek had assigned me a room nearby.

What was transpiring in and around the vehicle I had little opportunity to observe—such as the mobilization of the Cold Country army. The only open windows to which I had access faced a sheer black wall a hundred feet away. I could see the dark rocks upon which the vehicle was resting. And upward, a thousand feet of forbidding perpendicular cliff against the, blackness of the sky.

We were here, not only that first day-cycle, but three others. The sounds of the arriving men floated in to us, along with the clank of giant projectors laboriously being dragged over rocks. There were spots of lights outside, and dim vistas of encamped men working to assemble their mechanisms. And sometimes I had brief glimpses of dark lines of things slithering along the rocks. Giant insects—the brues—docile here with their masters.

The army, which had attacked the Water City, was here. There came others from the Cold County. I could not guess how many. By Earth standards of modern warfare, not many. Two thousand, perhaps.

Soon the whole place seemed glowing with a blue-green radiance. The weather continued with a threat of a slow-gathering storm. At times it was solid black night, then vaguely weak twilight, livid with the turgid yellow-green shafts that shot through the gathering clouds. And it was steadily colder outside.

They were tense hours for Rowena and me. We got the panel open again, but decided to take only a ray-cylinder each.

The guards at the foot of the ladder were changed at intervals, always armed and wholly alert. I could have shot them down, but I knew it would bring a hundred men upon us before we could get out of the ball's lower door.

I thought desperately I might break the metallic bars of an upper window, but I had no prolonged opportunity and no tools. The heat-ray from one of our cylinders would melt them through, but we would be discovered.

There was still Muta. Rowena's first talk with Muta was interrupted, but during the first cycle here in the mountains they spent the time of sleep together, and Rowena cautiously resumed her efforts. Muta was receptive. What Rowena now urged, the woman herself had born in mind when she told Jimmy that some time she would talk to him alone. Certainly she wanted Rowena away.

"You see, Muta—you saw my husband with me at the meal tonight? He loves me and I love him. Could you not see it?"

"That true. But what difference? Dorrek a man, take what he want and he want you."

Rowena gripped her. "That's the danger! You've got to help us escape from here, Muta!"

"No, he kill me if I try that! I frightened!"

"Talk softly! He won't kill you. He won't know anything about it. We'll plan how it can be done. You—at the time of sleep, like now—you can get the guards away from the ladder."

The plan was coming to Rowena as she talked. It was cold outside, and by another time of sleep with the approaching storm it would be still colder. She questioned Muta, found that would probably be so. And outside, Muta said, the men were beginning to wear enshrouding fur robes and hoods. Muta could get two of those. And give Rowena and me a little food and water to take with us.

It should be possible for the Mercurian woman to get the guards momentarily away from the ladder, long enough for Rowena and me, disguised, to slip past.

We would be alone in the mountainous wilds of a strange planet, but it was better than being here. I thought I had a general idea of how to get back to the Light Country. It was not far by Earth measurements.

Muta agreed to try it. She brought the hooded garments, which Rowena had concealed in a couch.

We thought we would manage the escape the next time of sleep. Muta was ready. Rowena had carefully drilled her in what she was to do.

We were ready. I was in my room, tense, waiting for Rowena's call. Outside, with a cold rising wind moaning past the rocks, the encampment was settling to sleep.

And then there was a sudden activity. A shrill distant alarm! A turmoil spreading everywhere. In a moment the lower tier of the ball was resounding with hurrying footsteps. Voices shouting.

I rushed into Rowena. She and Muta were there, standing with the hooded furs.

"Jack—what is it? Listen!"

Through the window bars the blackness outside was split with light—flares.

"Jack—Jack Dean!" I heard Dorrek's voice shouting on the ladder. Running footsteps up here in the upper tier. The ball's control rooms were being unsealed.

Dorrek burst in upon us; Rowena had barely time to hide the furs. Dorrek whirled on me.

"You stay here with Rowena. We move the ball—not safe here."

"Do what, Dorrek, wait—"

But he was gone. In the lower tier I could hear them sealing the outer door. The ball lifted, moved—not far—and again came to rest, in the middle of the encampment this time, resting on the rocky floor in the center of the valley-bowl. Outside the window we could see the confused glare of leaping, crossing ray beams.

The army of the Light Country had arrived to attack Dorrek in his mountain stronghold. The battle was bursting into an inferno around us!

CHAPTER XIII. FLIGHT TO BATTLE

As IT LEFT the Hill City in the half-light of that noonday, the army of the Light Country consisted of two divisions: the forces on the ground and those in the air. Of the young men who marched on foot there were perhaps a thousand. It could have been more, but Grenfell decided against it.

Warfare is different in every age, and far more does it differ in one world from another. Grenfell was not officially in command—that was given to a Light Country scientist, named Arton. But the Hill City officials looked to Grenfell as actual leader. A set of conditions wholly strange was involved: electrical warfare. A battle of crossing rays, of blasting, withering heat. A single technician at a projector could do the work of a thousand soldiers.

But Grenfell knew that no warfare, however supermodern, scientific, mechanical, will ever transcend the human factor.

The young men to go on foot were not primarily fighters, but their principal mission was to transport supplies: The food and water, the housing equipment for camping in the desert, the ammunition, electronic storage battery renewers, a renewal supply of the small hand weapons used by the air force. They carried a score of giant heat-ray projectors mounted upon little wheeled carts. Fifty additional carts were used for the supplies. They were drawn by domesticated brues.

The thousand young men, commanded by Arton, were slow moving and needed supplies for their own maintenance. The number would have been unnecessarily large, save that Grenfell greatly feared Dorrek's giant insects, trained for fighting. It was likely that Dorrek, when attacked, might loose his brues over the desert with a few men guiding them to raid the vulnerable Hill City. This, the ground army was prepared to oppose.

For defense, there was a black insulating fabric—a thin flexible, cloth-like material, dead-black in color, woven of hairthin metallic thread. At a distance of thirty feet a man clothed in it could withstand the heat-rays for many seconds. Garments and hoods were made of it, and shields of various sizes. But, like all devices of war, it was only partially effective.

The Light County air forces were of three kinds. The individual flying girls, of whom there were some eight hundred. They could not fly properly in the insulated suits. Some wore them, but most chose their filmy robes and carried six-foot flexible shields, folded for long distance flying, which could be opened in a moment. They wore belts with small ray projectors, knives and a variety of hand bombs to be thrown or dropped upon the enemy.

Tama was in command of these girls. There were eight divisions of about a hundred each. They flew in eight separate squads, each with its girl commander.

The second air division was that of the flying platforms, using from eight to thirty girls. The two largest carried a single giant projector each, which had an effective range of something like half a mile. Four Light Country men rode each of these platforms. Two others, carried four men with bombs. Three bore merely a single girl each—reserve platforms.

One platform carried Jimmy and Roc. Guy had been assigned with them, but, perhaps because of his dislike for Roc, he persuaded Grenfell against it. He and Toh rode a platform together.

And there was the Flying Cube. It was loaded now with reserve armament: weapons shields, fabric suits, food, medical equipment. It had a giant heat projector mounted now at a port on the D-Face deck, and the long-range Earth gun.

Grenfell rode in the Cube with his five associates. There were ten or fifteen Light Country men also now aboard the Cube, including four of the most skillful surgeons in the Hill City.

Grenfell decided to go in advance and start the attack; the men on the ground could arrive as a reserve force later. Grenfell let the flying girls lead the way. He kept the Cube poised in the midst of them. They took it slowly, so that the girls would not be tired. Within a few minutes the queue of marching men upon the ground—the little swaying carts with harnessed insects slithering ahead of them—all were left behind, out of sight beneath the horizon.

The metal desert lay ahead. After twenty miles the girls descended to rest. The Cube sailed cautiously ahead to make sure no enemy was in sight and then returned. The girls started again. Fantastic sight! They fluttered up, giant birds with vivid blue and crimson wings, flowing draperies, braided hair fastened to their sides, white limbs gracefully poised. They formed themselves into the eight squadrons, each with its leader, and followed by the flying platforms, winged swiftly off into the gathering twilight.

Jimmy, lying with his broken leg stiff in its splints, on his platform with Roc, gazed eagerly ahead. Two or three more stops and the mountains would come up over the forward horizon where it seemed a storm was gathering. Jimmy's mind was busy with still half formed personal plans. Grenfell had the big advantage over Dorrek in this coming battle. But Dorrek had one advantage, which, to Jimmy, was likely to prove a great handicap to Grenfell's activities.

For Rowena—and I, Jack Dean—were prisoners. It seemed to Grenfell likely that we would be kept confined in the silver ball. Dorrek would reason that Grenfell, fearing to kill us, would thus hesitate to attack the ball, his greatest weapon.

It was a great handicap. Grenfell strode up and down the deck of the Cube that morning considering it, his shock of gray hair ruffled, his square-jawed face set in a frown, his shoulders hunched. Jimmy was lying in a deck chair regarding him.

"I don't know how to get them out of that sphere," murmured Grenfell. "We'll have to watch our chance when we get there." He was talking half to himself.

Jimmy called, "Oh, Doc, I'm thinking the same thing you are. Once we have them safe, you can feel free to blow that blamed ball to bits. I've got a plan; will you listen?"

"Of course."

"Well, we don't know yet what conditions we're liable to meet. But let us assume we take these savages by surprise. My idea is we'll have them penned in the mountains. They'll be on the defensive, won't they? And the ball will be lying inside—well, what you'd call the enemy lines. And it will be black night. Right?"

"Jimmy, I have no way of guessing what the conditions will be. But I know one condition I'm afraid of—what these girls may do when they get in contact with the enemy. Eight hundred of them—supposed to be under my control. But they won't be! How can I control them? I've no adequate means of communication with them during a battle. A few flying platforms to take my orders!"

Grenfell was vehement. "Your description of how those girls fought that giant insect—that blue thing—in the Water City. Reckless! Never let up until they had it torn to shreds, and then collapsed into hysteria when it was over. If they get wild, if I can't control them—the whole eight hundred could kill themselves in half an hour."

"Tama can control them, Doc."

"I hope so. I've spoken to her. She stared at me with that little quizzical smile. "Oh, yes, Doctor, we will be prudent. We look to you to tell us what to do."

"That sounds fine. But—" Jimmy interrupted. "What I was saying; my idea is we'll have these savages penned in the mountains. You're not going to attack at once. Make the girls take it slow; that will help control 'em. It will be dark, won't it?"

"So I understand."

"Abnormally dark. Roc tells me this sky looks as though a black storm is coming. And a cold one, from the Night Country. Well, my idea is to watch my chance—get my platform up close to the enemy lines. Wear a black insulator suit, and creep through the lines. Get up to the ball, unseen, why not? And the doorway would probably be open—"

"But, Jimmy, you can't walk with that leg."

"I can creep, can't I? I may have no chance after the fighting starts, to consult with you. I want your permission now. It might be the lives of Rowena and Jack—and it might make all the difference between your losing or winning the battle. You want those barbarians coming to the Earth again—assaulting, abducting young girls like they did last year? If I get Rowena and Jack—you'll be free to blow that ball to bits. Chances are that Dorrek and all the leaders will be in it.

Grenfell hesitated; then he put his hands on Jimmy's shoulders and gazed into the flushed, freckled face with the tousled, brick-red hair above it.

"Do what you think best, Jimmy. Only—don't get killed.

As Grenfell stood up, Jimmy saw Roc standing a short distance down the length of dimly illumined deck. He had come from a nearby door, or perhaps he had been standing there unobserved for some time. Jimmy called, "Oh, Roc—come here."

Roc was to be his companion on the p at run. Jimmy was by nature impulsive, and he was keyed up, excited now. He gave Roc the general idea of his plan.

"Suppose we try it together, Roc. You'll be a great help if Dorrek was now trapped in the rocky bowl. As Grenfell had foreseen, he went instantly on the defensive. When the alarm came, the silver ball had been resting at the bottom of the valley near one of its side walls. Dorrek immediately moved it to the center of the bowl, three miles from the nearest enclosing cliffs.

Two hours passed, which were horribly irksome to the waiting Jimmy.

Near the top of the thousand-foot precipice at the opening to the valley, Grenfell's encampment was springing into existence on a boulder-strewn plateau. The Cube had landed on a nearby rocky eminence which dominated the scene. The men and the four hundred girls unloaded the Cube's supply of tents, lights, cables, batteries and light mechanisms; the food supplies; weapons and defensive armament.

Within an hour the tents and lights were erected—a little huddled group of dark-fabric shelters, strewn amid the rocks. Tiny hooded green lights dotted it, their dim radiance disclosing the figures of the winged girls moving busily about. The first meal was in preparation.

Jimmy called to Roc as the Mercurian laboriously hauled the base section of a projector to a spot where someone had said it should be taken.

"How far is the brink from here? I'm going there."

Roc answered his smile. "Of course, Turk." He called a passing girl, instructed her to have the projector assembled. "Very well, Turk. Come put your arm on my shoulder."

Jimmy found that he could almost hobble. He weighed hardly sixty pounds here on Mercury. With his arm over Roc's shoulders, they made a fair speed, passing beyond the lights of the camp, heading to the nearby brink where they could see over the valley.

Fragments of information, which Roc had picked up, he now gave Jimmy. Dorrek was caught in the valley. His men and brues were down there clustered around the silver ball. In all, they occupied a space of about a mile-wide circle, out in the center of the valley. There was no projector in either camp which could reach the other.

On the heights of the lower canyon entrance, Grenfell's second camp was being established. There was no way for Dorrek's men and brues to get out of the valley without passing through one of these two narrow gorges both of which Grenfell's projectors now dominated.

Across the dark rocky distance, in the direction of the Light Country, Jimmy thought he could distinguish the tiny lights of the other camp six miles away. Overhead a small group of girls winged off in that direction.

"Look!" exclaimed Roc suddenly.

They turned. Behind them, in the darkness a mile back on this upper plateau, was turmoil. Vague blurred sounds in the heavy, motionless night air. Tiny flashes of blue-green light—little beams leaping down, crossing with others leaping up. It lasted only a moment or two. The beams were extinguished; the sounds died. Jimmy learned afterward that a small group of armed girls, flying to investigate the surrounding country, had come upon a few of Dorrek's lurking men. And a brue. The men and the brue were killed, and three of the girls.

Grenfell now established patrols for all this neighborhood. At intervals they passed overhead, flying low with their search beams sweeping the crags.

It was a painfully long hobble for Jimmy, but at last he and Roc came to the brink of the cliff. In the center of the valley Dorrek had set up a ring of giant projectors, a mile in diameter, within which his army was enclosed. They were pointed directly upward, spreading beams of blue-green. At a few hundred feet above the ground they crossed, mingled into a solid curtain of light, a circular, mile-wide upstanding funnel.

It was queerly non-radiant, this barrage; inherently bluegreen, but it did not illumine the valley. The rocky floor, even close to where the projectors were set, was solid black. Nor did it radiate much heat. Within the beams of that thin, glowing curtain, the temperature must have been several thousand degrees centigrade—forty times the boiling point of water perhaps. But twenty feet away, its heat could scarcely be felt.

The effective height of this heat barrage was two miles, or less. The Cube could sail over it, drop a bomb, blow the Mercurian ball to bits.

Jimmy's thoughts raced. At the base of the barrage curtain, where the spreading beams came from the projectors, there were triangular holes of unprotected darkness. Five hundred feet on the rocks, narrowing to the point where the beams met overhead. Into those triangular holes Grenfell could creep up to the silver ball. A vague glow of light seemed to disclose the round silver shape of the ball lying in the center of the encampment.

Jimmy had conceived that Dorrek's barrage was immovable. The holes in it so easy to penetrate. But within a minute he saw that was not so. One of the projectors swung suddenly forward. Its beam swept the empty valley floor, almost reached the base of the cliff, darted sidewise, then upward and back to its former position. It made Jimmy shudder. Nothing living could have withstood the briefest touch of that faint lurid glow.

Grenfell's projector at the canyon mouth presently sent down an answering beam. Its source was along the cliff top not far from where Roc and Jimmy were crouching. Its range was something near a mile; it swept the nearby valley floor, dominated the exit, but could not reach Dorrek's projectors. After a moment it was extinguished.

"The storm is coming," said Roc.

"A black storm?"

"Yes."

The clouds overhead were shot with occasional turgid yellow shafts. They illumined the valley far more than did the enemy barrage beams. The air here on the cliffs was cold. A little wind had sprung up fitfully.

"We had better go back," Roc added. "The storm may burst now, or in an hour or two."

"Soon, Roc."

Presently, as an experiment, Grenfell tried a shot from the long-range Earth gun on the deck of the Cube. But Dorrek's men were alert. The gun spat yellow; instantly one of the barrage projectors bent downward. The shell went into the beam, exploded harmlessly in mid-flight over the valley.

"I'm going down there," Jimmy said suddenly. "Roc, you've got to help me. Get our platform—assemble our girls. We're going down." In the darkness he could not see Roc's face.

"Yes. I will try."

"Now listen—" A sudden thought struck Jimmy. "If you see Guy and Toh, tell them what we're doing. Maybe they'd like to come—"

If only Jimmy had insisted on that!

Roc was on his feet. In the darkness Jimmy could only hear his voice. "Very well. You wait here. If I see Tama, I will ask her to come. Down there in the darkness, if trouble should arise, we could send Tama quickly up for help."

As Jimmy hesitated, Roc added vehemently: "I am not one who would want Tama placed in danger. But just to land in the darkness down there—not too dangerous."

"Okay. Hurry it."

Jimmy sat alone on the cliff top through another interval, staring down at the distant enemy barrage. The projectors could not sweep the ground since their long range would annihilate the projector next in line, he noticed.

Suddenly he saw a hand heat-beam dart sidewise from near one of the projectors. It swept the ground with a range of nearly a hundred feet. And a guard at the neighboring projector answered it with a similar horizontal beam.

Jimmy smiled grimly. That was not so good. But his fabric suit might withstand that smaller beam. He would have to chance it.

His attention was distracted by the beat of wings close over his head. Roc arriving with their platform? But it was not. Another platform, seven girls on each of its sides, went sailing past. Fifty feet over Jimmy, and twice that far beyond the brink of the cliff top. Two men were crouching on the platform.

A sudden silent burst of yellow-red radiance in the sky briefly illumined them—Guy and Toh! They did not see Jimmy. He stood up impulsively, cursed his leg, and hastily sat down again.

The platform winged away, but Jimmy did not lose sight of it, as it headed off toward Grenfell's other camp. But it rose steeply and presently came back. Then in a broad spiral, almost directly over Jimmy's head, it mounted.

Grenfell was making another test. The platform was a mere dot against the turgid sky. Great funnel-shaped clouds were slowly wheeling up there. Queer green and yellow shafts occasionally burst in them.

The platform rose steadily. A mile? Two miles? Twelve or fifteen thousand feet? Then Jimmy realized: Guy and Toh were trying to fly across the top of the barrage curtain to test the height and try to drop a bomb.

The little dot up there began moving out over the valley. Dorrek's men had seen it. There was a movement of all of the barrage beams. They turned diagonally inward, closing at the top almost together in a mingled blurred glow.

The platform crossed over them. The falling bomb was invisible to Jimmy at first. But then he saw it strike the upper reaches of the barrage funnel as a glowing point of light. Its metal shell turning luminous. The heat was weak at first. But in a second or two the falling dot of fire burst into a puff of flame. A tiny report echoed over the silent valley. The platform came sailing back, descending well behind Jimmy, lost in the darkness of the upper plateau.

A rush of wings sounded behind Jimmy. His platform, complete with its crew of fourteen girls, landed near the brink.

Jimmy saw Roc and Tama dismounting. They came toward him.

Tama greeted him: "Jimmy, you must not try this thing. Roc has told me—"

He waved away her protests.

"Don't worry, Tama—I'm no cripple. I'm sparing myself now—you wait until you see how I can make speed when I have to. You going with us, Tama?"

"Yes," said Roc quietly. "For a little way."

They mounted the platform. Jimmy saw three knives, three small hand cylinders and a flashlight in the weapon rack. And a pile of garments—the black insulated suits.

"There is a cloak and hood for Tama," said Roc. "But in flying it cannot protect the wings."

The little leading girl, Grazia, was beside Jimmy. The platform was raised, ready for launching.

She leaned toward him. Her face was white and earnest. There was fear in her eyes, but her jaw was set

with determination. All the girls were watching her. She said, in an undertone: "You instruct us where to go, Jimmy."

"Start us off, Grazia. Down to the valley. Keep close to the cliff, right along here on this side. Understand me?"

"Yes. I take orders from you or Tama. Not Roc."

The platform lifted, swayed over the brink and swooped downward.

CHAPTER XIV. NO MAN'S LAND

JIMMY HEADED THEM down the valley for a mile. They landed on the dark rocky floor close to the foot of the cliff. It was far darker than above. There was no wind down here. But the heavy air was dank and chill. The girls were shivering from cold and from excitement.

Jimmy and Roc had donned the black suits. Jimmy carried a knife, a cylinder and the flashlight. His suit encased him from feet to neck, and to the tips of his gloved fingers. His hood, with flexible-paneled visor, dangled now at his back.

Tama donned her cloak. It covered her wings for walking, but was slitted so that for flying her wings could come through it. The three of them stood whispering.

"Roc, did anyone know we started?" demanded Jimmy.

Roc stood apart, waiting. "No," he answered.

"Well, we're all right so far. I want the platform to take us as near as we dare go," Jimmy explained to Grazia. "Pick out a gully or something, where you can hide while you wait for me."

It seemed that Roc hesitated. Tama turned to him abruptly.

"We will do what he says."

The platform fluttered cautiously forward, landed in a little pit-like depression. The enemy line was near at hand. The barrage loomed up, a huge, glowing veil. They left the platform hidden. Tama stayed with it.

"We haven't been seen," Jimmy whispered. "You wait here. We may come back in a rush, Tama." He gripped her slim shoulders. "I hope to God we have Rowena and Jack with us!"

"Come," whispered Roc.

He helped Jimmy for a short distance. The barrage curtain seemed almost overhead. But there was no light from it here on the rocky surface. The loose boulders were often ten or twenty feet high. Jimmy and Roc made their way cautiously forward. They were heading into the dark space between two of the projectors.

Jimmy pulled up his hood. "We'd better get lower. Crawl. I can make it."

They crept on. Jimmy, without thought of the pain, found he could drag his abnormally light weight swiftly forward. Roc crept behind him. After a time, Jimmy was winded. He paused for breath, then went on. The nearest projector was some two hundred feet to the left of him. Occasionally it was hidden by intervening crags. The other, to the right, lay obscured below a little upstanding ridge.

There was no alarm, though every moment Jimmy feared it might come. Every boulder might have a lurking guard in the blackness beside it.

Soon Jimmy figured he was within the enemy line. The barrage curtain closed in a great sweeping arc over his head. The left hand projector was a trifle behind him now; in the dim light from it he could see the dark forms of the attendants.

Ahead, the broken, ridged surface went down a gentle slope. Shapes were down there—straggling tents, the outposts of the camp. He saw a group of moving lights.

Abruptly Jimmy realized that Roc was not with him. He waited, stretched out, panting, gazing back. Roc had been following, but he was gone now. Afraid! Deserted—gone back to the girls—

A grin was on Jimmy's face. He rested a few moments, then dragged himself on. In Jimmy's mind there had been no thought of how he might get Rowena out of Dorrek's clutches. He told himself now that he would decide that when the time came. The first thing was to get to the Mercurian vehicle and into it.

There was a commotion ahead, men dragging a projector across the camp. Their small hand lights showed. Jimmy rolled into a little crevice between two boulders and rested until they had passed. He was well within the lines now.

Overhead he could see the green-yellow sky, and frequent lightning flares now. He heard a dim, queerly muffled thunderclap. And a wind was surging over the valley. The storm was at hand.

He saw too, that a distant section of the barrage was moving out from the camp, toward the valley wall. Three or four of the projectors were being rolled outward. It was a mile away, but the movement was obvious.

The camp showed distant activity. Dorrek was starting something. Jimmy lay with pounding heart, watching. The barrage was moving toward the cliff, in the direction of the canyon entrance where Grenfell had established his girls, and the Cube.

An enemy rocket mounted from a point on the valley floor less than a mile from Jimmy. The barrage parted to let it pass. It went in an arc upward. Through the brief blank hole in the barrage Jimmy saw it clearly; it fell on the cliff. Burst with a puff of light, and from it came a turgid ball of smoke. Gas fumes! They clung heavily to the cliff top—a little widening cloud. The wind which now was up there caught the fumes, and blew them back over the plateau.

Grenfell's projectors were sweeping the nearby rocks. The Cube fired a shot. It came screaming down, went into the barrage and burst in mid-air.

The battle had begun. A sudden activity everywhere. From the faraway cliff-top, girls were rising, dropping bombs to dissipate the approaching gas fumes.

Jimmy came to himself to realize that whatever he could do must be done now. He crept on forward. He had forgotten Dorrek's brues, the gruesome giant insects. With a shudder that turned him cold, he saw one slithering across the camp with a man driving it.

They did not see him. Other men passed; he rolled into a tiny hollow and lay breathless as their feet and legs showed almost overhead. Legs garbed in a woolly brown fur. He waited a moment or two after they were gone, raised himself up on his hands to gaze cautiously out of the hollow.

From the nearby darkness two fur-robed figures were advancing. Jimmy ducked back, fumbling for his knife; he could not risk a ray flash which would give the alarm.

But he was too late! A giant man came with a leap upon him!

* * * *

Tama crouched in the ravine with the platform and the fourteen other girls. Ten minutes passed. Every instant she feared to hear the sound of alarm within the enemy camp. It was a mad, desperate attempt. She was sorry she had not tried harder to restrain Jimmy.

A dark form showed at the brink of the ravine. These girls were not armed, except Tama, who carried a knife and a ray cylinder. The little projector was in her hand; but before she could level it, a soft warning

voice came from the arriving figure.

"Tama!"

It was Roc. He slid down into the ravine, greeting Tama in their native language.

"All is well, Tama."

His black hood dangled to his shoulders, exposing his pale face. In his hand he held his cylinder. He fronted Tama and the girls, with his back to the gully side.

"But where is Jimmy Turk?" Tama lowered her weapon. "What happened, Roc? Why did you return?"

"He goes on in." Roc laughed, harsh as the grind of a file rasping on steel. "I let him go. Why not? They will catch him, of course. Kill him ... Look there!"

His swift gesture made Tama and most of the other girls turn around. There was nothing to see. Tama felt Roc leap upon her. His hands tore away her cylinder, jerked her knife from her belt, and flung her to the platform.

"Quiet, all of you!" His weapon swept the girls, menacing. His voice hissed at them. "If you do not want me to kill your Tama, do as I tell you. Take your places at the handles. We are going up. Lie still, you. By the god of light, I'm in no mood to fool with you, Tama." He shoved her to the forward end of the platform. "If you try to fly off, my beam will kill you. I mean it."

"Roc! Are your senses gone?"

"No. I've just got them ... Grazia, start us up. To any of you who dares to leave your place—it is death! I mean it!"

The white, frightened girls lifted the platform. Roc crouched in its stern, facing forward. Tama huddled tense, watching him. His weapon was leveled. It swept the girls, came back upon her.

"To the nearest clifftop, Grazia. Low at first—down, you fool! Do you want us to be seen? The barrage turned on us, shrivel us to ashes?"

They skimmed low over the valley, back toward the cliff. Tama, facing the rear, could see the enemy lines over Roc's crouching form. The barrage, on its distant side, was moving outward. Activity in the enemy camp. Was Jimmy caught? She feared so. She saw the rocket mount to the cliff. Saw Grenfell answer with a shot.

Roc chuckled. "Out of it, just in time."

The girls were flying in frightened disorder. He warned them. They flew more evenly. The platform ascended, reached the plateau at a point some two miles from Grenfell's upper camp. It passed above the cliff at an altitude of a few hundred feet; sailed back over the dark empty reaches of the upper plain. It flew swiftly; the panic-stricken girls were menaced by Roc's weapon and his grim threats.

The lights and sounds of the battle faded into the distance. Ahead lay the black desolate vastnesses of the mountains, with the bursting storm upon them. The sky was lurid now with shafts of red and yellow light splitting the cloud funnels. Rain was falling, tossed by a crazy wind.

Roc had not moved from his crouching place in the platform stern. The red lightning flares painted his livid face, the Satanic peak of hair on his forehead, his blazing dark eyes.

Tama said abruptly out of the silence, "Are you mad, Roc? Where are you taking us?"

Roc laughed again, but calmly now, and shifted his tense position. But he was still alert with his weapon.

"Back home. The Cave City, where you will be safe, in the Cold Country until this fighting is over, Tama. Dorrek will win, I hope. These fool meddling Earthmen—I wish them all to their hell. And I have you—that is all I want."

"But I thought—" Her protest sounded so futile. She checked it. And then her heart leaped into her throat. Over Roc's shoulder, in the lurid darkness behind them, it seemed that she saw a following shape. She forced herself to speak, to hold Roc's attention, to keep him from turning to gaze back.

"But, Roc, I thought—"

"You thought I was going to plunge into a battle? Get killed! Or have you tell me you love that accursed Earthman, Guy Palisse."

"I never said I loved him, Roc."

"Do you?"

"Or do I love you? Is this the way to make me love you? Trickery once more. Traitor, again."

The blob behind them was coming closer. Overtaking them. Another flying platform.

"Perhaps it is the way to make you love me," Roc retorted. "We shall see. I do not want you to be killed. I'm taking you to safety."

"Or is it for yourself you most fear?" she demanded. "You are despicable, Roc. A traitor. A lying little coward—"

The girls at the handles showed a sudden confusion. They had seen the pursing platform; two or three of them were looking backward.

It attracted Roc's attention. He turned; and Tama would have leaped upon him but he was too quick for her.

"Back! Sit quiet! You, Grazia—a faster stroke!"

But the girls, although they pretended to do their best, were faltering. Roc did not dare turn his head again; he moved forward, almost upon Tama, with the cylinder leveled at her breast. He called to the girls: "Faster! Do you want me to kill her?"

The other platform was now barely a hundred feet behind them, and coming at far greater speed. It suddenly began ascending, to pass over them. The wind had momentarily lulled, but now it came up again as a roaring blast. The platform swayed, lurched as the girls fought to hold it.

The wind tore at his words and hurled them away. A crimson flare in the sky illumined the other platform clearly. Two men were upon it. Triumph swept Tama. It was Guy and Toh! They were close behind, rising to a fifty foot higher level. Tama could presently see only the black insulated bottom of the platform, the winged shapes of its girls around it, and a face projecting beyond its forward edge. The face of her brother Toh, staring down.

Roc was crouching on one knee.

"Faster!"

Grazia, flying close, at Tama's side, had looked up and seen Toh, and had caught a signal from his hand over the edge of the platform. Guy was leaning over the side, trying to aim down at Roc. Both platforms were lurching; he could not make sure of any aim.

Grazia suddenly left her handle and with folded wings dropped into the void. It distracted Roc, as she had intended. He leaned sideways, his weapon spat its small deadly beam. But it missed Grazia's falling body; her wings opened; she flew away and vanished.

The lower platform wavered dangerously, all its girls in a panic of confusion. And then Toh leaped over the forward edge of the upper platform. He came hurtling down the fifty-foot space with a knife in his outstretched hand.

Roc forgot Tama. He turned his cylinder upward and fired.

Toh's body crashed upon Roc. Toh's knife stabbed in one convulsive blow.

On the swaying platform under Tama's horrified gaze, the bodies of the two men lay writhing in last agonies, and then were still.

CHAPTER XV. TRAPPED

ROWENA AND I might have escaped from the silver ball that time when Muta smuggled the brown-furred garments to us. She was ready to distract the attention of the guards. But the alarm came. Grenfell's Cube was sighted, sailing high over the valley. Dorrek's encampment sprang into confusion.

He rushed in to us.

"You stay here with Rowena. We move the ball—not safe here."

Rowena had barely time to hide our robes in her bed covering. Muta stood against the wall. Dorrek whirled around and was gone.

Our futile plans! Escape was impossible now. Men were clattering everywhere in the small vehicle's interior. The guards still held their position at the foot of the ladder. And other men were constantly upon it. The upper-tier rooms near us were occupied—men in the control rooms, which had hastily been unsealed. The lower door was closed. The ball lifted; the thrum of its rocket-stream ejectors sounded amid the turmoil of footsteps and voices.

I had thought that the battle was bursting around us, but almost at once I saw that it was not. Rowena and I stood at the small window oval. She had loosened the ropes which hampered her. But Dorrek had not noticed or had not cared.

Muta came like a shadow and stood behind us. The ball had been resting within a hundred feet of the valley's precipitous wall. Our window had faced that way; and all the main encampment was behind us, out in the open valley. As we lifted now, we had a wider vista. The ball sailed outward from the cliff, then backed into the center of the valley some three miles from the nearest cliff and came to rest again on the rocks.

We were now in the center of the encampment. I saw its turmoil of alarm. Men were dragging projectors with cables slithering after them like giant snakes. Brues were being harnessed to small carts loaded with storage batteries.

Mound-shaped tents were set up in straggling array on the rocky floor, and illumined by tiny lights, strung from metal poles. And houses which had been built of gathered loose stones crudely piled in tiers, with skins and fabric cloth stretched for a roof, dotted the valley floor.

Many of the giant projectors were ready. Dorrek had at least half expected this alarm. Within ten minutes after he had sighted the Cube, his great circular barrage was springing up around him. The flare of their upstanding beams, the hiss of them, was what I had mistaken for an attack.

The camp occupied a mile-wide circle, and within half an hour the barrage was complete around it. From our second-tier window we presently saw tiny distant lights which marked the coming of Grenfell's force.

Dorrek's barrage was constantly being strengthened—reserve protectors dragged to the circular line, reserve batteries for renewal. There seemed hordes of fur-clad men. Hand weapons were being distributed. A hundred brues went past, lashed by their drivers, slithering off toward a section of the barrage. Still no attack came from Grenfell.

Here in the ball I stood alert, waiting for an opportunity to get away with Rowena. But always there seemed too many men moving around this upper tier and the incline. But once out into the confusion of the camp, clad like these other furred men, our chances might be better now than before.

"Soon, Rowena," I whispered. "If this upper corridor is cleared, even for a moment—"

Muta held stolidly to her decision to help us.

"I watch at the door." She stood there, motionless.

At last she signaled, "Now!"

But a dozen men came trampling up from below, rummaging in the room adjoining us. I saw the flare and heard the scream of Grenfell's test shot, and then the bursting of a bomb overhead. The conflict was beginning. We must escape, now if ever.

There seemed renewed activity in a distant section of the camp. Men marching in that direction. Groups of the giant insects—and all the reserve projectors, and mechanisms for the launching of rockets and bombs—were being taken now to one segment of the barrage line. Was Dorrek preparing an offensive move off there? It seemed so.

The little upper corridor was momentarily vacant. I joined Muta.

"We will try it now?"

She nodded. "Yes. I go down."

There were only two guards at the foot of the incline. Muta started down to them. I hastened back to Rowena.

"The robes—hurry, dear."

We donned the robes, pulled the hoods over our heads, close against our faces. Our stature, if closely remarked, was a danger. Rowena was taller than most of these men. And I had no counterpart save Dorrek.

We crept to the ladder. Muta had drawn the guards aside. My heart was pounding with the sudden fear that now, at the last, the inscrutable Mercurian woman would betray us. But she did not. She was talking with low, passionate words to the two guards. What she said, we never knew. They saw us, perhaps, as we slipped past but she held their attention.

We reached the lower doorway. Men were nearby, working at some apparatus. We walked, stooping. The doorway was open.

A six-foot ladder descended into the dim activity of the camp. I was upon it, with Rowena behind me. The dark forms of men were outside. They would see us; but men had been passing in and out of the vehicle constantly—in our brown fur robes we would not attract particular notice.

A cylinder weapon was in my band. But I realized that a shot would bring the camp upon us. I stuffed the cylinder back into the pocket of the robe and unclasped a long knife blade.

"Jack! Hurry! Someone's coming behind us!"

I had paused in the doorway, making sure of what was below. I tensed to jump down, but the dark moving form of a brute was disclosed. I could not chance passing near it, to have it sense me as an enemy.

"Rowena—this way!"

I pushed her back through the doorway. The room inside was dim. Footsteps were upon us! We shrank against the wall, but we could be seen,

"Stoop down low," I whispered.

A pile of apparatus lay by the doorway. We bent over it, pretending to be working. The voices of men in the adjoining room were audible.

"Jack, can't we get out?" Rowena whispered.

"A brue outside. I didn't dare—just a minute!"

"Someone is coming!"

I saw Rowena's white hand, and gripped it. I felt then, with horrible premonition, that in another moment we would be challenged. We could not answer—neither of us could speak Mercurian. For a brief instant I held Rowena's hand. With freedom ahead of us, all my thoughts had gone to the future. The world—our blessed Earth—so wonderful a place, with Rowena. Was this to be the end of our life together, trapped here in this dark room, in the depths of the mountains of a strange planet?

The footsteps were upon us. The brue had stopped almost at the foot of the entrance ladder.

"Rowena—leap over it! We'll have to chance it!"

Run openly, with our great earth strides through the camp? Or stay here ten seconds longer and be discovered. It flashed upon me that the choice I must make held all the difference between life and death.

I suddenly drew Rowena back from the doorway.

What destiny held me? In that second of decision, what benign fate made me choose rightly? What vagary of that mysterious thing we call the mind guided my uncertain muscles? Life is a queer business!

The brue reared itself on the ladder. Half a dozen men appeared behind the startled giant insect. It sensed us, no doubt. The men lashed at it; one jabbed with a pronged pole, and sullenly it slithered back to the ground, and the men drove it away.

In the room, the approaching footsteps brought a heavy shape directly toward us. It was Muta!

She touched me. "You go now! I want never see you again!"

I could well subscribe to that. Rowena bent down.

"Muta," she whispered, "thank you for this. I wish you happiness."

No one was near the ladder. We descended it. I caught a glimpse of the face of the Cold Country woman as she stood watching us go.

We moved slowly into the dim activity of the camp. I had carefully decided which way to head. We half circled the outside of the vehicle, threaded our way between two dark tent shelters and made off over the rocks toward the distant barrage line.

"Carefully, Rowena." I walked beside her, whispering. "Hold your balance." For the slight gravity and our tense impatience made it difficult to keep from running. "If we're challenged, stand perfectly still. I'll do what I can."

The barrage line seemed horribly far ahead of us across a dark, rocky expanse. But this was the least occupied, least active section of the encampment. All the movement was the other way.

Soon we were past the thickest cluster of the tents. We came to an almost unoccupied spread of boulder—strewn floor.

"Now, faster!"

We took longer, freer steps. Soon we were returning, pausing momentarily to look around. A line of brues showed in advance of us. We waited to let it go by. Overhead the storm was bursting into greater violence. Whirlpools of a crazy wind plucked at us. And the rain was beginning. The barrage line came nearer. I headed toward the space between two of the giant projectors. The attendants at them showed clearly, dark shapes of three or four men at each.

"Jack, look!"

Behind us, far across the camp, the opposite segment of the barrage was moving outward. Dorrek was beginning an offensive. We saw the gas bomb mount and break upon the clifftop. A shot from the Cube came screaming down and burst against the barrage. Girls over the cliffs were dropping bombs to neutralize and dissipate the gas fumes.

We ran. A man driving a brue crossed in front of us. We waited, crouching in the crevice of an overhanging rock. Started again. We were not far from the barrage line—soon we would have the two projectors behind us. The rocky surface here was broken with numerous little gullies and hollows. We jumped most of them, sailing in huge fantastic leaps,

"Wait!"

I drew Rowena down barely in time to avoid discovery. Four men passed close to us. Again we started. A small hollow lay immediately before us. And as we approached, a black figure rose from it. He saw us! It was too late to drop out of sight. I expected a shot. With a leap I was over the brink of the little pit.

The black figure struck at me with a knife, but I avoided the blow and saw a white face.

"Jimmy!"

He was lying here with his broken leg, trying desperately to crawl across the enemy camp to rescue us. There was moisture in Rowena's eyes, a catch in her voice as she joined us in the pit. We rested a moment, whispered to each other. We were triumphant. We would soon be out of this. Tama was nearby, with a flying platform.

"All right, now," Jimmy murmured. "How glad I am you're not in the sphere! It's been holding up this fight." He was trembling with eagerness and triumph. "Fearful handicap for Grenfell—come on—we've got to get out—get back to Grenfell. Things are starting off there already."

We crawled forward, but we did not get far. The camp, in advance of us and to the sides, burst into a sudden chaos.

Bombs were dropping from overhead. One of them exploded within the camp. Outside the barrage, girls were attacking.

"Heck!" muttered Jimmy. "We can't get out now."

I gathered him in my arms. He was incredibly light, as though I were holding a child. I ran, with Rowena

beside me. But it was useless. A light flare came down from overhead and struck the ground near us. For a second or two the rocks were painted white with the dazzling glare. I stumbled and fell. Jimmy kept his wits; he reached and drew Rowena down with us.

We lay in a cluster of boulders against which we huddled for shelter. And over us, with amazing suddenness, the battle raged in full fury.

We were trapped. The storm and the conflict were both at their height. How long we three lay there I have no idea. I could not guess the progress of the battle; I only knew that every moment a more lurid inferno showed around us.

Rowena suddenly whispered, "Where is Jimmy?"

I realized that she and I were alone! Jimmy had crawled away from us!

CHAPTER XVI. BATTLE FURY

Grenfell, during all this time, found himself in an increasing dilemma. He knew that once he ordered these flying virgins to the attack, the conflict would be sharp and brief.

But Grenfell had no intention of precipitating such a crisis. Dorrek's forces were bottled; by exhaustion of his food supplies he could be overcome. And there was the question of electronic power. It seemed probable that Dorrek could not maintain this huge barrage for many hours. Inevitably his batteries would be exhausted.

In a day-cycle Commander Arton would be coming up the canyon with the reinforcements, a thousand young men, upon whom Grenfell preferred the brunt of the conflict to fall. An attack now by the flying girls would be too deadly—the losses too great.

But Grenfell finally sent the two largest platforms to an altitude of fifteen thousand feet. Each carried a giant projector. The rays spat down, and crossed the barrage curtain with a hissing turmoil of sparks.

Coming back, one of the platforms abruptly disobeyed orders. Four men manned its long-range ray; thirty girls flew it. Instead of returning to Grenfell's camp on the cliff, it dropped low into the valley and hurled itself at one of the base projectors of the barrage. The projector bent its ray down, but missed. The platform went like a speeding projectile. Its beam darting before it. Then Dorrek's ray caught it and clung. From the deck of the Cube the shuddering Grenfell saw the bodies of the thirty girls wither and fall. For an instant the insulated platform held together. It was barely a hundred feet from the barrage base. Its ray spluttered and vanished. The platform tilted, and crashed to the rocks, the black figures of its men little falling dots against the barrage light.

A group of girls made a similar attack. From the darkness of the valley floor they hurled themselves at an opening between the barrage projectors.

Flying in a group, they skimmed the surface. They safely passed the barrage line, rose inside over the enemy camp. For a minute perhaps they dropped their bombs. The flares were visible to Grenfell through the curtain. How many of Dorrek's men and insects were killed was never known.

The beams from the hand weapons of the girls were flashing down. They flew holding their shields to protect their bodies and wings as well as they could. Mounting, they crossed perhaps a third of the camp, leaving a trail of destruction beneath them. But one by one the enemy rays caught them and brought them down.

That was enough for Grenfell. Three hundred of the girls were still in the cliff camp near the Cube. He ordered them to keep out of the air, and sent two of the emergency platforms to fly to the lower camp and order the four hundred girls, the projectors and flying platforms there to come up here and join him. Dorrek's activities were at this upper end, and if he tried to escape through the lower canyon he would encounter Arton's army.

Grenfell sought Tama, but she was missing. He could not locate Jimmy Turk, Guy, Toh, or Roc.

The storm was increasing in fury. Grenfell moved the Cube forward and began firing directly down. But the shots were always intercepted. The Cube was unwieldy when flying for short distances close to the ground. But twice Grenfell manipulated it around the valley; and once it fired down from four miles overhead.

He wanted to hit the base projectors, but he could not. One or two of the shots entered the camp. This

he did not altogether want. It was a horrible handicap, for Grenfell did not want a shot of his to strike the Mercurian ball in which Rowena and I had been imprisoned.

Rain was presently falling. The crazy wind had steadied. The red lightning flares and thunder cracks were almost continuous. Dorrek's mounting bombs fell upon the cliff. The wind brought the gas fumes. Grenfell closed up the Cube, firing down into the turmoil through its deck port.

He ordered the girls farther back and a hundred of them into the air to dissipate the fumes with neutralizing bombs.

It was then, with Tama and Guy missing, that events got beyond Grenfell's control. Dorrek's barrage advanced again until it reached the base of the cliff. Grenfell thought Dorrek's move was to command the canyon—to enable his men to escape back toward the Cold Country. He planned to let them go; the deep, narrow gorge was twenty miles long in this direction; the escaping men and brues could easily be assailed later. Grenfell was watching the silver ball where it still lay in the center of the valley. He was convinced that Dorrek and his leaders were aboard it; if he should ascend to get away, the Cube was ready for the chase.

But the enemy did not escape. Brues began crawling up the perpendicular cliff in the segment which the barrage now commanded. A hundred of the giant insects were on top of the cliff before Grenfell was aware of it. And to each of them three or four men had clung. They spread out over the upper plateau.

Lurking men among the rocks, dark, slithering insects spreading out, advancing upon Grenfell's camp. The fume bombs and rockets stopped coming. But the insects with their human burden mounted the cliff wall steadily.

Grenfell ordered his girls and platforms into the air. They flew low, seeking out the crawling enemy. The upper plateau in all that vicinity was dotted with the tiny lights of the girls, flashing down upon the gruesome insects. Brief combats—always with the brue left writhing in death agony.

Dorrek's men were harder to find. Once upon the cliff-top, they had ordered the insects forward, left them, and vanished. Presently no more came up. The move puzzled Grenfell.

Then abruptly they attacked the Cube! Grenfell was standing with his men on D-Face deck. The lower door was open. There was a flurry of girls flying nearby. Grenfell saw, in a red lightning puff, fifty or more furred figures of men running forward among the crags near at hand. With short band rays darting before them, they rushed at the Cube's doorway.

The infuriated, reckless girls hurled themselves down like frenzied birds. Doubtless none of the men would have lived to reach the doorway. But it startled Grenfell, as Dorrek probably intended. The Cube hastily rose; and as it lifted, a projector, of longer range than any of Dorrek's others, shot at it from the barrage line.

The beam caught the mounting Cube. There was a horrible moment when Grenfell thought that the hull plates would melt. The interior heated, stifling; choking fumes of fusing metal; a rain of smoke and fire and snapping, sizzling sparks outside.

Then it was over. The Cube's hull, protected to resist the cold of interplanetary space and the friction heat of atmospheric passage, withstood the brief, intense blast. The Cube rose beyond range, and came again into the lurid, storm-filled night.

Grenfell had flung on all power. He checked it now. Baker, Gibbons and the others—and the Hill City officials who were here—gathered in a startled, frightened group on the deck. The Cube seemed not

greatly harmed, but it had been a close call.

From a height of some twenty thousand feet Grenfell gazed down and saw that all the girls had flung themselves into the conflict! Darting at the barrage in a score of places, they dropped down into it like plummets.

Two platforms with men and bombs came from the plateau in a long dive toward a triangular opening between the projectors. Both got through, into the camp, raking it for an instant before they fell in little bursts of flame. Those horrible little bursts of flame! They were everywhere. Tiny puffs. Each of them a human life gone. And the barrage line held.

To Grenfell, cold with horror, it seemed an eternity; yet he had no more than time to order Rance to lower the Cube. Another minute—or five at the most—those reckless frenzied girls would all have sacrificed themselves.

Grenfell stood breathless. And suddenly he saw a distant segment of the barrage go down. A single projector went dark, leaving a great hole above it. But why? The girls had not done it; there had been no attack there.

Abruptly the dark projector flashed on again. Grenfell gasped at an incredible sight.

* * * *

When she could find no trace of Jimmy, Rowena was alarmed.

"He's gone, Jack! Jimmy Turk has gone!"

"But he was with us a moment ago. Rowena, he—"

I leaped to my feet, standing in the bottom of the little hollow within the enemy camp, with the battle raging around us. Then I saw him; he was crawling on the ground a hundred feet away, his broken leg dragging after him. In three or four leaps I was with him.

"What are you doing?" I flung myself down with him. "What in—"

"Let me alone! Lie near the ground. You'll be safe in that hollow."

He tried to pull away from me; but when I held him he told me his plan. Possible, at least.

"Look, Jack, we're near it. Only three men there. We can end this war at once."

The area here was comparatively quiet.

"Look, Jack—how close—"

I had not realized how near we were to one of the barrage projectors. Jimmy had crawled to a little rise of ground. Ahead, not over a hundred feet from us, the projector stood on the rocks with its vertical spreading beam above it—a three-foot metallic cone, mounted on a low wheeled carriage. Three men stood on the small low platform; their figures showed dark against the radiance. There was momentarily nothing between us and those men. And their attention was outward, not back toward us, behind them in the camp.

It was black bore save for the lightning flares. I bounded back to Rowena. She flattened herself down in the hollow against the rocks, as I directed, but turned her white face up to me. A lightning flash painted it with a flush of red.

I was again with Jimmy. The men at the projector still had not seen us. A hundred feet to go...

"I'll carry you," I whispered, "until we get within range."

"No! Might see us. Takes a little longer, but I can make good speed."

In a lull of all the screaming sounds of the turmoil, we could hear the steady hum and hiss of this projector as we got closer to it.

"Jack, I'll give the word and we'll fire together."

Our hand cylinders had a short range; we did not know how far, but certainly twenty feet. We got almost that close, still undiscovered. I was aware of an increased turmoil outside the barrage. But not at this particular segment.

The men on the projector platform turned to look back across the camp. But their gaze was in the air toward the rising Cube with the high-powered ray leaping up and striking it,

We crawled a little farther. One of the men was looking our way. Then his attention seemed diverted, we went on again. We were doubtless plainly visible now.

A rush for it, Jimmy went like a maimed crab on hands and one leg.

"Jack—now!"

Our little blue-green beams flashed. Two of the men went down. The other leaped over the platform edge. His shot went wide of us. He vanished. I ran for the projector, with Jimmy scuttling after me. From behind the platform the figure appeared. My shot exploded his weapon, but his insulated suit withstood it. My leap carried me into him. We fell, and rolled under the platform. He was a thickset man but frail. He lay inert under my blows.

I rose from under the projector carriage. Jimmy had reached it, and pulled himself to the platform; he fumbled with the mechanism. By chance he turned it off. He was cursing, panting, as I jumped up beside him.

"Blamed thing—can't—" He pushed me away and tilted the projector down. "Got it! Now, Jack!"

He flashed on the giant beam to horizontal. Not outward—inward!

A single slow, sideways oscillation, swept in one brief instant the full width of the camp with a swath of destruction and death! For an instant—there was the gruesome sizzle and crackle of withering, blasting heat. The whole barrage, as the central controlling mechanism must have, been struck, went black. Jimmy's beam vanished with it. Darkness everywhere.

Then only the mounting yellow flames of the burning camp was left, the wrecked, half-fused silver ball lying broken in its center; and over the chaos the flying girls darted with harmless little search-beams now to see what might be left alive.

We found Rowena safe in the little gully over which the blast had swept. Tama and Guy returned with the bodies of Toh and Roc on their flying platform, only in time to see the strangely abrupt, terrible end to the conflict.

It was hours before the storm had passed and we were ready to return to Hill City. A few prisoners were taken, not many. They found Dorrek's body lying in the wreckage of his vehicle. And Muta's body, with

her hands clasped about his neck.

With the wounded crowding the Cube, we started back. The return of the victorious army! There is no greater misnomer than to call any returning army victorious. The Cube was jammed with a gruesome burden: The maimed; the living who, most of them, would rather have died. The platforms were heavy with wingless girls. Every cart in Arton's army was laden for the return; the young men tenderly carried stretchers.

* * * *

Tama and Guy were married in the Hill City. New laws were proposed regarding the clipping and mutilation of the virgins' wings. They had saved their nation, these fearless, reckless—once rebellious—virgins. They had put aside their grievance against the men for the greater cause.

There was, as yet, no enactment of the law to say that Tama could be married with wings unclipped, yet she was. And every man who saw the strange little ceremony raised his voice to cheer. Jimmy stood there beside them. And Tama turned and kissed him in Earth fashion before them all.

Rowena, Jimmy and I are back on Earth now. Guy and Tama came with us for a brief visit. As Grenfell foresaw, a new era is at hand: the era of interplanetary travel. New worlds, but not to conquer.

A few moments ago, Rowena, Jimmy and I witnessed what, to us at least, was the most emotion-stirring sight of our lives. The first broadcast televised scene of Tama flying. It was why she made this second visit to the Earth—to show herself—to cement the friendship of the two worlds.

Here in my study we gathered before my mirror-grid. It showed the narrow vista of a woodland scene. From over the distant green trees, with the fleecy sky behind her, Tama came flying. Waving black hair and blue-white draperies; white limbs poised; vivid crimson wings outstretched. Guy was standing in the foreground. She came soaring like a graceful bird and landed upon tiptoe with back-draping wings. She stood smiling, bowing, and kissing her hands to her vast unseen audience. And then turning, she ran and flung herself into Guy's waiting arms.

THE END

